
John Whitberg
The Man with the Periwinkle Eyes
Volume II: Castle of Glass

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“They are deceived who flatter themselves that the ignorant and debased slave has no conception of the magnitude of his wrongs. They are deceived who imagine that he arises from his knees, with back lacerated and bleeding, cherishing only a spirit of meekness and forgiveness. A day may come- it will come, if his prayer is heard- a terrible day of vengeance when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy.”

-Solomon Northup, 12 Years a Slave

Introduction

Before I continue with Kyle's personal story, I believe it is necessary to first give the reader an introduction to the project he will be taken to in the coming chapters, which is where he would labor for the rest of his life. I will also introduce the reader to the concept of corporations within the Breakaway.

Project Phoenix is a time travel program ran by the U.S. Air Force. Its beginnings lie in 1942. The Air Force had been granted a base that they called Montauk Air Force Station, colloquially referred to as Camp Hero. The base had been a Naval Air Station for 20 years prior.

In 1942, The Air Force, anticipating the Nazi threat, began to dig bunkers deep underground. They made two shocking discoveries. The first was that, situated several thousands of feet below ground level, laid a monstrous cave system. The second, more disturbing find, was that they weren't the only living things down there.

The Air Force discovered that within the cave system there lived an artificial intelligence. It had been lying dormant for thousands, possibly millions of years, waiting to be discovered and awakened, having been made and abandoned by some long gone alien civilization. Its intelligence level was of a caliber

almost impossible to explain. Upon its discovery, it immediately began to attempt to manipulate the humans it encountered, and, due to it having absolute telepathic access to nearly all those it came across, it usually succeeded. However, the Air Force had their own agendas, and began to heavily study the AI in return.

The War dragged on, and eventually, the Axis Powers fled into space, as was recounted in Volume One. In 1947, a craft belonging to the off-world Axis Germans was shot down near Roswell, New Mexico. Documents on board revealed that its navigation chair could be used to open portals through a 4th dimension, known in common sci-fi parlance as "hyperspace." This allowed for travel in time, space, and even to other universes. The catch was that the chair could only be operated by aliens, and some highly psionically gifted humans, who would have to be trained from childhood to do so. The chair was soon moved to Montauk Air Force Base, and the research on it merged with the research on the Montauk AI.

As the U.S. Air Force did not, at that time, have access to alien slaves, or even to the technology necessary to create hybrids, they resorted to abducting children. Both children from select bloodlines, who were likely to be psionically gifted, and random children off the streets. Some could indeed operate the chair. That said, most wound up doing other jobs related to the massive time travel program that developed from this undertaking. The project was named Project Phoenix, to symbolize the supposed reclamation and restoration of the timeline.

The project came at an enormous cost. Between 1947 and 2014, approximately 2,000,000 children were forced to participate in Project Phoenix, and an unknown number since, as record keeping was stopped in 2014. Of these 2,000,000, approximately 300,000 died, from starvation, overworking, extrajudicial executions, combat deaths, etcetera. Their surviving comrades refer to them as “Lost Boys.”

The worst period, by far, was from April 1971 until December 1986, an interval that some survivors now refer to as “the Reign of Terror.” During this period, the project was headed by a group of men and women who lived in luxury, ruling over their slaves.

The project’s main head in this period, a man by the name of Preston Nichols, had his lunches brought in from his favorite eateries in New York and Tokyo, and his main lackey, a scientist by the name of Dr. Maria Simmons, was rumored to bathe in a three-to-one mixture of wine and human blood. The children and other assets starved, forced to subsist on the dog food rations they were issued and whatever morsels could be smuggled in from the outside.

It was during this period that Kyle was sent to Camp Hero, in the spring of 1984. That, however, is a story best told when the time comes. Now, on to the corporations of the Breakaway.

As the Axis Nations fled into space, eventually pursued by the Allied Nations, a society naturally formed. And, as tends to happen in fascist societies, corporations began to form. However, it quickly became apparent that these companies were not being prioritized in a society built entirely to serve its military.

As a result, these corporations began forming military contracts, and soon enough, building out their own militias, and uniting themselves along shared corporate, rather than military, interests, forming a sort of "Breakaway within the Breakaway." This loose alliance of companies is sometimes today referred to as the ICC, though they themselves eschew flags or any kind of factional mindset, or even a formal name, and so I personally reject the notion of their status as a separate faction.

Due to his new circumstances, Kyle would find himself thrust into the inner world of the Breakaway corporations. Some of the companies involved have already been named in Volume One. However, it is throughout this volume and the ones to follow that the inner circles of these companies, and the families who run them, will be revealed.

I should also add, there is a "translation clause" in effect here. The conversations contained are all recounted in English, (or whatever language you're reading this in) but, in real life, occurred in any number of languages. The reader may usually infer, based on context, what the actual language was.

Now, these introductions done, let us resume our journey.

Chapter 1

The man began regaining consciousness. His first sensations were of a warm wetness enveloping the back half of his body, the front half being exposed to the air. He could tell he was lying on his back, on a squishy surface. Altogether, it was quite a pleasant sensation.

Slowly, the man's senses and awareness began to return, and he reluctantly opened his eyes. Indeed, he was lying on his back, in what seemed to be a coffin-shaped vat of fluid, lit up on the inside. The fluid was translucent and light blue, with about the consistency of glycerin.

The man looked up, seeing a smooth concrete ceiling above, the vat being open on top. He looked down at himself next. He was completely nude. He was quite pleased at what he saw, his body being lightly tanned and quite well muscled, though not so much muscled as to be aesthetically displeasing.

"I'm built like a Greek hero, only better endowed," he thought, with a slight smile.

His momentary joy was cut off by a sudden awareness.

"Why is my appearance so alien to me?" The man suddenly thought. "Shouldn't I know what I look like already?"

Also, with the realization that he could move his head, the man began to experiment with his other limbs. They moved

quite easily, and after a moment, he had sat up in the vat. Nothing was holding him down. From the sitting position, he observed his surroundings, the daze slowly wearing off.

The room was enormous. The vat he lay in was apparently self-contained, and up and down the length of the warehouse-sized room, in neat rows and columns, were hundreds, if not thousands, of other vats just like it. Some were empty, but most were occupied by apparently human people, both men and women. The light from inside the vats was the only light in the room, but the sheer volume of vats made it adequate.

On a far wall, in massive chrome letters of a jagged font, were two words: “Arasaka Robotics.”

After observing all this, the man sat up, the only soul stirring in the room. Indeed, aside from an almost imperceptible hum emanating from the vats themselves, the place was, as they say, “quiet as the grave.”

Underneath the chrome letters on the wall, on the far left side, was a door. It was the only way in or out of this room that the man could see. He considered heading for it.

“Fuck it,” the man muttered, feeling a tinge of surprise that he could actually speak.

His mind made up, the man swung his legs out of the vat, using the momentum to propel himself out. Even as he did so, he knew it was a mistake. His legs went slack the moment they hit the floor. He tumbled forward, catching himself on the vat next to his, which was empty.

Once again, the intrusive thought hit him; “Why am I so unfamiliar with this body?”

Then another, even more shocking thought; “Who am I?”

He contemplated this latter question as he leaned against the vat, realizing he had no answer. However, still being somewhat dazed, he didn’t feel distressed.

The feeling in his legs soon returned, and the man got to his feet. Then, cautiously at first, he began walking towards the door, his awareness slowly returning. He noticed, for instance, that the translucent fluid that had filled the vat was stubborn stuff. It never seemed to stop running and dripping off his body, even after he attempted to wipe it off.

He eventually reached the door, finding that there was a mirror placed directly next to it. He paused and examined himself.

He was not displeased with what he saw; indeed, most men would be overjoyed to find that they looked like the one that stared back at him. However, panic set in when he looked at his own face, plumbed the depths of his mind for a name, and received none. He received no recollections at all. His awareness had begun the moment he awoke in the vat.

Now resolved to find answers, he tried the door. It was not even latched, and swung open without any difficulty.

The man found himself in what appeared to be a reception area with white walls, a large desk, and, here and there, an assortment of chairs. Behind the desk, the man noted a calendar, indicating that the date was December 24th, 1983.

The desk was manned by one tiny woman. If the man was to hazard a guess, she was of Japanese stock. She turned in obvious shock at the sight of him walking into this place. He

continued to walk, until he stood directly in front of the desk, still bare naked, and spoke the five words which seemed most appropriate.

“Who, what, when, where, why?”

The tiny woman stammered, no doubt somewhat terrified by this nude man who, it would turn out, should not have ever been in this room.

The woman began to stammer out an answer, then simply said; “I’ll go get help,” then fled the room.

The man did not have to wait long. Soon, two other men appeared. They were large, and wielded guns and cattle prods. The man began to back away and protest.

“What the fuck is this? I want answers! Where am I? Who am I?”

“Just stay calm. Keep your eyes on me, Sir,” one of the guards said. As he spoke, one guard dodged around to the back of the confused man, and administered the cattle prod. As it turned out, it was no ordinary cattle prod. It was incredibly potent, and the man collapsed forward, his physique rendered useless.

In this vegetative state, the guards carried the man through a door to the side of the room, loaded him onto a stretcher, and wheeled him through a bewildering set of all-white hallways. He was dropped in a padded white room, with a window by the door. It strongly resembled a room in a mental institution. The man somehow made this association in his mind, and felt insulted, then confused.

“How do I know these things?” he wondered.

He was abandoned in the room for some time. No one came

near. The man examined a good deal of the room. The door and window were both impassible, and the walls, ceiling, and floor were all covered in padding. The only lighting was from the hallway outside the room, the window to which was set back several feet, so only the portion directly outside it was visible. As the window only began about halfway up the wall, even the floor of the hallway was not visible.

After what seemed like an eternity, an older Japanese woman in a lab coat appeared on the other side of the window. It had a network of small holes in it, to enable speaking.

“I am Dr. Noriko Tarakada. I represent Arasaka Robotics. In fact, I designed you. Now, could I have one of my assistants do something that would increase your comfort, Sir? Perhaps bring you a robe to maintain your decency?”

The man rushed to the window.

“Look, Dr. Tarakada. All due respect here, but all I want is some fucking answers! What do you mean that you ‘designed’ me? And enough with this calling me ‘Sir.’ What is my fucking name?” he screamed bluntly.

“Well. Answers you want. Answers you shall get. I am a doctor of cybernetics. I designed your brain and body, both of which are fully synthetic. My greatest design yet. However, the consciousness or soul that animates your body and mind belonged to a man by the name of Kyle Dellschau. If you want a name, I suppose that one will have to do for now.”

Author’s note. No doubt my intelligent readers will have immediately guessed that “the man” was Kyle before this was stated at the end. I wrote in this way so as to keep as close as I could to the way Kyle experienced this ordeal.

Chapter 2

This chapter will serve to highlight some history which has been successfully buried from all mainstream sources, as well as to introduce certain people who would become key figures in Kyle's life going forward.

Profile: Arasaka Family

Takeshi Arasaka (1869-1946) was born to two parents of the Samurai Class, in the city of Kanazawa, Meiji Era Japan. Much of his early life is difficult to verify, even from third party sources, and largely came from the mouth of Takeshi's only son, in interviews carried out in various off-world media. For this reason, the names of Takeshi's parents are unknown.

What is generally agreed upon is that Takeshi was born either a generation too early or too late. His childhood, as little as is known about it, was full of turmoil and uncertainty, as the class that his parents belonged to was abolished when Takeshi was just 2 years old, and his father likely committed Seppuku soon after, to avoid the dishonor that would have befallen the family as a result.

Takeshi's mother, however, is considered to have been more enterprising, and had an eye to the future, moving herself and her son to Tokyo, which had only recently been made the capital of Japan, and was already becoming one of the most

important cities on the planet.

Little else is known about Takeshi's early life, except that he entered the Imperial Army at a young age, likely under pressure from his mother, and that he married at what was considered in those days to be quite late in life, somewhere over the age of 30.

His wife bore 3 children- two twin girls, Sayuri and Eiko, born 1904, and a boy, Shinji, born 1906. The girls both died of complicated pregnancies before the ages of 21, leaving only Shinji to carry on the family's legacy and honor.

Even after his marriage, Takeshi continued to rise in the Imperial Army. He is known to have achieved the rank of General well before the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1932. What is unknown, however, is how he became entangled in top secret intelligence circles, and particularly, the then-budding field of research into extraterrestrial artifacts.

What is well-known is that when the Japanese occupied Manila, Philippines, in December 1941, they found a cache of ET technology from the Orion Syndicate, and placed the research into its reverse engineering into Takeshi Arasaka's capable hands. This technology, it must be noted, included the accoutrements necessary to convert a biological body into a cyborg, or synthetic, and is what would ultimately led to the creation of Arasaka Robotics.

Takeshi's research, or rather the research he lorded over, was ultimately a success. Cyborg production, using primarily the bodies of fallen soldiers and civilians killed in the war, was in full swing by 1945. However, this new technology was not enough to turn the tide of the war, the outcome of which led to

the interstellar treaties which allowed the Axis Powers to build their empires anew, in space. When the offer to move off planet was extended to him, Takeshi naturally accepted. As a consequence, any and all records of the family that could be found on Earth were destroyed.

Takeshi died on Mars in 1946, and as a result, the development of the cyborg industry was left to his son, Shinji. By his own account, Shinji was born in 1906, in a large house in the Asakusa district of Tokyo. He claimed that his mother died when he was four, leading to him being raised by a single father.

As his only parent was a single man of the military, as well as the son of two former Samurai, Shinji often described his upbringing as "masculine in the extreme." Takeshi pressured Shinji into joining the Imperial Army, and discouraged his son from marrying, encouraging Shinji instead to fulfill his sexual needs with prostitutes, and to therefore devote his life to the military.

Because of this fatherly pressure, it wasn't until the age of 30 that Shinji married Toshiko Takeyama, born 1909, a woman with a near identical upbringing to Shinji. Shinji and Toshiko moved off planet in 1945. After his father's death, Shinji made the radical decision to privatize the cyborg industry he had inherited, naming the new company "Arasaka Robotics." This company would go on to become perhaps the most profitable in the entire Breakaway, with an income higher than that of any existing Earth nation, all of which is held in the hands of the Arasaka family. This bestowed them a level of wealth that's unimaginable to most of my readers, being able to buy entire

planets, if it pleased them.

Ultimately, Shinji would produce, or rather choose to acknowledge, twelve children, nine of them legitimate. They were as follows;

Yoshi Arasaka
(1937-Present.)
Sakura Saimashi, née Arasaka
(1940-Present.)
Michiko Tseng, née Arasaka
(1947-Present, twin sister of Akira, disowned 1974.)
Akira Arasaka
(1947-present, twin brother of Michiko.)
Shinji Arasaka Jr
(1960-Present, illegitimate.)
Akane Reinmüller, née Arasaka
(1964-present, twin sister of Miwako.)
Miwako Fujikawa, née Arasaka
(1964-Present, twin sister of Akane.)
Harune Arasaka
(1977-2014.) (Disowned 1986.)
Chiyo Masamune, née Arasaka
(1978-Present.)
Hanako Arasaka
(1980-Present, illegitimate.)
Himiko Algorov, née Arasaka
(1984-Present.)
Inosuke Arasaka
(1989-Present, illegitimate.)

Some readers may raise their eyebrows at the longevity of the Arasakas' ability to produce children. It's important to note that the wealthy of the Breakaway have access to age regression technology, which allows them to live for hundreds or even thousands of years, with their bodies kept at around the age of 25. Had Shinji not been assassinated in 1995, he likely would have gone on to father hundreds of children. Indeed, he may already have, as he was extremely prone to infidelity.

Shinji's children almost uniformly recall him as an absent father, militant in his discipline, and seemingly only interested in his children when they do something he disapproves of. His favorites, Sakura and Shinji Jr., seem to remember him fondly however, saying that he looked after them closely, and taught them the Samurai arts and honor codes that he had learned from his own father. The two are possibly the only people in the galaxy who mourned Shinji Sr's untimely death, including his wife.

I suppose it now makes sense to give brief overviews of each child.

Yoshi was born in Kyoto, in 1937. From a very young age, he showed an odd mixture of both rebelliousness and conservatism in his nature. He displayed a strong interest in the military and in cultural traditions, but also eschewed Japanese etiquette, being blunt in nature, growing a beard and having tattoos. He is, perhaps, the closest thing to the son that his grandfather Takeshi had always wanted, as he remains unmarried, getting his sexual needs fulfilled transactionally, and abdicating the family business for a permanent infantry posi-

tion, where he continues to serve, largely estranged from his family.

Sakura was also born in Kyoto, in 1940, when it looked as though the Empire of Japan would win the war. Sakura was her father's favorite, eventually inheriting the family business upon his death, and being the only person in existence that he ever allowed to wield his favorite katana. He gave her the nickname of Ha No Kifujin, or "Lady of the Blade." Sakura is considered by most who know her to be psychotic, having a love of violence, and relishing with delight the blood money that her family's empire is built on. She remained unmarried until 1978, when she wedded Tomoyuki "Tommy" Saimashi- a purely corporate partnership, as Tomoyuki was set to inherit Saimashi Software, another Breakaway company. Sakura then coldly and emotionlessly collaborated with her father in assassinating her husband, bringing Saimashi Software to within the Arasaka's corporate empire. Sakura remains the owner and sole head of both companies.

Michiko was born in 1947, in the Arasaka's newly built home on Mars, in the Elysium Planitia region, part of the Martian "Green Belt." She has a twin brother, Akira, described below. Michiko was quiet and studious as a child, preferring the book over the blade. She was her mother's favorite, and pursued a career in biotechnology that benefited the family business, though she began to grow apart from her family when she learned the extent of the company's barbarity. The divide was finalized when she married Angus Tseng in 1974. For her family, who were and are still locked firmly in the racial mind-

set of Imperial Japan, their daughter marrying a Chinese (particularly Nanjingese) man was considered borderline bestiality, and therefore caused them to disown Michiko. To this day, she is unable to attend family functions, even funerals, for fear of being murdered by her family for her "dishonor."

Akira was born approximately five minutes after Michiko, mentioned above, in the same home. From toddlerhood, he showed violent and mischievous tendencies, often playing practical jokes on his siblings and the staff of the home. It is said that more household staff at the Arasaka estate quit because of harassment from Akira than from any other cause. Akira was also rumored to kill small animals growing up, and certainly was known to dissect those he found already dead. At the age of 17, Akira was secretly signed up for military service by his father. This was explained by the family as being due to "juvenile delinquency," however, it was due in fact to Akira being what most would call a serial rapist. Shinji Sr's success in signing his son up is open to interpretation. Akira's psychopathy did, indeed, find an outlet in the military, where he remains. If anything, it was too successful, as there are now many individuals on multiple planets who look over their shoulders in terror when they hear footsteps, afraid of Akira's return.

Shinji Jr. was born in 1960, in the colony of New Munich, on the planet known as Vega Prime, the most populated planet in the Vega star system. It was to here that the Arasaka family had moved in 1949. Shinji Jr. was an illegitimate child, born of an illicit affair between Shinji Sr. and a geisha who worked for the family. When news of her pregnancy surfaced, the geisha was

cast out into the colony, forcing her to become a prostitute, and subsequently die destitute when Shinji Jr. was only three.

Shinji Jr's earliest cognitive memories are of begging for food on the cyberpunk streets of New Munich. In a rare moment of humanity, Shinji Sr. located his illegitimate son and brought him into the family. Shinji Jr. is one of the few to express fond memories of his father, even as the rest of the family treated him as an outsider, though he now admits and fights the barbarity of his family's business. However, he speaks fondly of his father training him in the Samurai and Ninjutsu arts. He was given the nickname of "Rei," meaning "Zero," indicating an assassin who moves through the night totally unnoticed, lacking even an identity, as they are just a shadow. Shinji Jr. remains unmarried and childless, choosing, again, a military life.

Akane was born in 1964, at the family's estate on Vega Prime. She has a twin sister, Miwako, described below. In childhood, Akane was prone to flights of imagination and a greedy disposition, both of which were indulged by her mother, transforming Akane into the very definition of a "spoiled brat." In her teenage years, it was discovered that she had a strong singing talent. Akane used her family's connections to launch a career singing at the most exclusive clubs and events in the colonies, usually performing classic Enka and J-pop tunes. In 1989, she married Heinz Reinmüller, a highly ranked space Nazi, allowing her to break into the German interstellar musical market as well. She and Heinz have so far produced three boys and a girl, and Akane herself can still be seen performing at the

most exclusive events on different planets. Her songs are rarely officially recorded, and the few records she has made are highly valuable collector's items, sadly unavailable anywhere on Terra.

Miwako was born eight minutes after her twin sister, Akane, described above. She embraced her upbringing, taking a strong interest in business. Like her sister Sakura, she entered into a marriage of corporate convenience, marrying Jiro Fujikawa, the inheritor of Fujikawa Enterprises, a major developer in the virtual reality industry of the various off-world colonies. Jiro, however, has been allowed to live, though his company is now nothing more than a puppet of Arasaka Robotics, who have total market control over Fujikawa Enterprise's products. After Sakura, Miwako is likely the family member most connected and associated with her family's business, serving as a kind of "executive diplomat" on their behalf.

Harune was born one month prematurely in 1977 while the family was on a secret visit to Kyoto on Earth. He was quiet and effeminate as a boy. For this reason, Shinji Sr. took Harune to an oracle when he was not quite yet 10 years old. The oracle revealed that Harune would be gay. This caused Shinji Sr. to be filled with such hatred for young Harune that he disowned and sent him to Camp Hero, where he would go on to be raised by Kyle. After sending him away, Shinji Sr. generally never acknowledged Harune, refusing to even say his name, instead referring to him (in English, to add further insult) as "that little fucking faggot." While all members of the Arasaka family will be present in this book to varying degrees, it is Harune who is by far the most essential to Kyle's story.

Chiyo was born in 1978 at the family's estate. Growing up, she had a theatrical streak, often dressing up in wild and provocative costumes, and performing plays at family events. She is, perhaps, the most innocuous member of the family, marrying a wealthy, but non-politically important man by the name of Ren Masamune. They have so far produced two girls and a boy, and live on the planet known as Typhon.

Hanako was another illegitimate child. However, unlike Shinji Jr's mother, who was left destitute, Hanako's mother, a German woman, was already very wealthy, and as such, was largely unaffected by Shinji Sr. abandoning them. However, Hanako's mother (whose name is unknown) was killed in a terrorist attack by the Orion Syndicate when Hanako was 13, whereupon Shinji Sr. adopted her, under pressure from his wife. Hanako is notable as being the only Arasaka daughter to never marry, instead choosing a life in the military, as her brother Yoshi, though Hanako chose an intelligence position, where she remains.

Himiko was born in 1984, the youngest girl, and was 11 when Shinji Sr. died. One notable trait of hers was her Waardenburg Syndrome, best explained as an albinism of the eyes. She was a sickly child, and grew up unnaturally short, even with her family's unfettered access to regeneration tanks, gene therapy, and cybernetic enhancements. This difference caused Himiko to be a depressed girl, which her mother found embarrassing. Due to this, Himiko's mother married her off aged 19 to Alexei Algorov, the heir apparent to Algorov Dialectic, a notoriously brutal off-world mercenary company. Alexei did indeed inherit the

company, putting it under de facto Arasaka control, due to Himiko having a far stronger and more business minded personality than him. In Kyle's words about Alexei; "He'll never be half the man she is."

Inosuke was another illegitimate child, born on Mars in 1989. Very little is known about his biological mother, and he was adopted back into the family just three months before Shinji Sr's death in 1995, when Inosuke had not yet turned 6. Inosuke was a bookish child, small for his age until turning 13, which led to him being bullied in his youth. He learned martial arts as a consequence, becoming a rather violent man, though seemingly loosened up in recent years, after marrying a Martian born Argentine girl of the Coronado family (a name to remember for later) and having a daughter.

Author's note. This chapter has little to explain. I trust that the reader is not bored, as I must ask the reader to not forget this chapter.

Chapter 3

Kyle, having just relearned his name, began to calm down slightly, and accepted Dr. Tarakada's offer of a robe to regain his modesty. He did not, by then, consider the implications of being synthetic.

Soon, a robe was brought by one of the guards, who kept his cattle prod extended the entire time. Kyle had learned his lesson however, and accepted the robe without a fight.

Once the guard left again, Kyle donned the robe, then reapproached Dr. Tarakada, asking a few more questions. It turned out that he was in an Arasaka Robotics plant near the equator of Triton, the largest moon of Neptune, in the city of New Kyoto. Kyle's body and mind, Dr. Tarakada said, were purpose-built. He had been designed for infiltration, espionage, and combat, adapted to do these things at a level that a baseline human could not.

While being synthetic, Kyle had also been made to pass as human. He was visually and tangibly completely the same. He would even have realistic-looking and smelling sweat, and the blood in his veins, while it was indeed artificial, containing a system of nanites, was designed to have the color and consistency of human blood. His internal anatomy, however, was not human passing. Functions such as digestion and breathing were

not part of his body, though he was able to eat and drink. However, the food and drinks would come out as they'd gone in. Yet he had been graciously provided with a full set of taste buds, and although he was infertile, he was otherwise sexually functional and able to have the same sensations as any man.

Kyle's emotional components are difficult to explain. His soul emerged in virtually the same emotional state as when it had been removed from his human body, and he still felt the full range of emotions; fear, anger, joy, sadness, protectiveness, arousal, etcetera. However, this was almost certainly not Dr. Tarakada's intention. While some simulated emotions, such as righteous indignation and a sex drive had indeed been programmed in to blend Kyle in and motivate him, having full human emotions would create conflict with the jobs he had been designed for.

After explaining the basics to Kyle, Dr. Tarakada reached under the chair she sat in opposite Kyle, and produced a black briefcase. From this she pulled three objects; a tape recorder, a pad of paper, and what appeared to be a sheet of glass, about one foot by 18 inches, perhaps two inches thick. Dr. Tarakada tapped the glass, and it lit up, then words and images appeared on it.

This glass device was what's commonly known as a glass pad, a piece of technology common in the Breakaway, similar to the electronic tablets of Earth, only far more advanced, and of course transparent.

Kyle was surprised that, on Dr. Tarakada producing the glass pad, he instantly understood it. It was then that he realized that

there must be a database of such things, downloaded into his new electronic brain.

After booting up the glass pad, Dr. Tarakada spoke; “I’d like you to play a game with me, Sir. Or Mr. Dellschau, if you prefer.”

Kyle: “I do. Prefer that, I mean. And what sort of game?”

Tarakada: “Quite a simple one. A test of purpose and the mind. I ask you a series of questions, selected from my glass pad, and you answer. There are no wrong answers. I write them down here, but my recorder here picks it all up, in case I miss something in my notes. Now, shall we begin?”

Kyle mulled this in his mind. He didn’t like it one bit, but then remembered where he was standing- a padded room with an impassible door, and a plate of unbreakable glass his only view to the outside world, guarded by thugs who carried weapons that turned his artificial muscles to jelly.

“Fine,” he thought to himself. “Anything to get out of this hole.” He gave the go-ahead to Dr. Tarakada, and the game began- Tarakada asking questions, and Kyle answering. He never argued. He wanted only to get it done, that he might be released. On nearly every question, Tarakada would switch languages, and Kyle would respond in kind. The database of his mind obviously included many languages. Below is a transcript of the test, with questions and answers translated for me by Kyle himself, in our telepathic conversations.

Tarakada: “How do you define autonomy?”

Kyle: “Freedom from molestation or duress by outside forces.”

Tarakada: “How do you define freedom?”

Kyle: “The ability to act upon my will without interference.”

Tarakada: “What is a nation?”

Kyle: “An ethnic group who choose to separate themselves from global interference.”

Tarakada: “You strike up a conversation with a woman in public. The woman confides that she’s a victim of sex trafficking. How do you respond?”

Kyle: “I take her home with me, then use every resource at my disposal to rescue her from the situation.”

Tarakada: “What is sentience?”

Kyle: “The ability to look at oneself in the mirror and recognize that which stares back as being human.”

Tarakada: “What is emotion?”

Kyle: “A feeling which emanates from the soul in response to triggering stimuli.”

Tarakada: “You are chasing a terrorist. He runs into a crowded stadium. Do you bomb the stadium, ending his life alongside the many civilians inside, or do you take pity on the civilians, thereby allowing the terrorist to escape back to the safety of his sleeper cell?”

Kyle: “I let him live. I see no point in fighting terrorism with what amounts to more terrorism.”

Tarakada: “You are at an affluent party. You eat whatever meal is served. Straight after, your host, a man of great status and import, tells you that the food you ate included endangered animals that are considered cute. How do you respond?”

Kyle: “Fuck ‘status and import.’ I slap the host in the face, then leave the party.”

Tarakada: “What makes someone human?”

Kyle: “A DNA test.”

Kyle would come to regret that answer later in life, but it was what he believed in the moment.

Tarakada: “Do you have a type of person you’re attracted to?”

Kyle: “Tall blonde women who are easy to sleep with.”

Tarakada: “What is a family?”

Kyle: “A group of people bonded together by familial love.”

Tarakada: “Do you have free will?”

Kyle: “I’m locked in a padded room. Obviously not.”

With that, Dr. Tarakada looked up with a slight smile. “That concludes this test,” she said. Kyle noticed that she looked slightly nauseous, and that she nearly bolted away.

And so, Kyle waited. However, his situation was not to improve for the time being. Shortly after, a shutter closed over the window, plunging the padded room into complete darkness.

Kyle was soon subjected to the tortures associated with solitary incarceration. Loud music and other sounds, such as screams and babies crying, were blasted into his room at irregular hours. The shutter opened and closed at bizarre intervals, at turns flooding the room with light and turning it into an abyss.

What Kyle did not realize was that he had scored too highly on the test. He was, in essence, a failed product. The test had shown him as more human than most biological humans, scoring higher than any of the other myriad synthetics who had taken the test. As a result, his fate was being decided by a review board, and the torture applied to break his spirit.

Meanwhile, in a mansion on a planet in the system of Alpha Centauri, a man had heard of this and it had piqued his interest. The man in question was Emmermann, Kyle's CO from his childhood in Project IBIS.

The shock of Kyle's test result, which indicated that Arasaka Robotics may have accidentally created a sentient artificial intelligence, had very quickly reached the ears of Shinji Sr., who already was on a shuttle bound for Alpha Centauri. After a typical party, he and Emmermann, his old friend, had met up at the latter's house.

Emmermann's interest had been excited at the notion of a sentient AI man, designed as a perfect soldier. However, he had become resolved to acquire him when he heard that the AI man was Kyle Dellschau, whom he had, in his own view, "made" as a child, lost, and now yearned to re-exploit.

"I want the man. I will pay whatever price you ask," Emmermann said to Shinji Sr.

"You know I can't just do that. My company may have accidentally created one of the most dangerous products to ever exist. I can't just sell it. But I could, gladly, make him disappear into your hands, if you were to do a favor for me. Off the record, of course."

And so it was arranged. Shinji Sr, it turned out, had a thorn in his side. His son-in-law, Tomoyuki, "Tommy" Saimashi, the husband of his eldest daughter and favorite child, Sakura. Tommy was the heir to Saimashi Software, a computer conglomerate, whose developments Shinji Sr. had wanted to bring into his empire by marrying his daughter to Tommy.

Tommy, on the other hand, was unwilling to be ruled by his father-in-law. However, if he was killed, then Sakura, who was loyal to her father and their empire, would inherit his estate.

Emmermann agreed to carry out this assassination, in secret, in exchange for Kyle. During the days that Kyle languished in agony in his padded room on Triton, a scheme was hatched and executed.

Emmermann made use of his top assassin, recently acquired from a Martian prison. The man he called "Mein rechte Hand."- a young man by the name of Georg Nimmer.

Georg always performed his assassinations with flair. He had a sense of the theatrical, and would perform his executions in public places that were supposed to be too secure for such a thing.

For this particular assignment, Georg chose to execute Saimashi at his own office, located in the space elevator tower of Spire 1, on the planet known as Corelia. The reader is advised to remember that planet, as it will come up again.

Georg chose a vantage point from one of the upper inside balconies, looking down through the center of the building to the atrium on the ground floor. The floor, hundreds of stories up, was unoccupied. Georg was able to smuggle his rifle up there in pieces and lie in wait.

The ground floor hosted a tempura restaurant, where Tommy Saimashi ate his lunch every day. It was almost too easy. Georg simply aimed his scope down, in the direction of the bank of elevators, and when Tommy appeared, having descended on one of the elevators, he shot.

Sakura was standing next to Tommy at the moment the bullet shattered his skull. Georg almost felt a spot of pity for Sakura, knowing that this sight must be a shock, not to mention the amount of money she would spend on dry cleaning, having her husband's brains and blood removed from her dress, but this pang quickly left him. Sakura began to scream after a few moments, but through his scope, Georg observed that this was an obvious act. For the first few moments, Sakura had been poorly suppressing a satisfied grin.

Georg then left, returning on transport to Centurion. Emmermann was satisfied, as was Shinji Sr., and so the deal was done, with Kyle brooding and miserable, struggling to maintain his sanity and dignity in his padded room. This ended as abruptly as it had began, with the door swinging open and a guard wordlessly throwing in a blue jumpsuit, a pair of socks, and a pair of black boots. Kyle simply put them on, at that time too traumatized to ask questions.

Within a few minutes, the door opened again. A guard appeared there.

"Let's get moving, Mr. Dellschau."

"And where are we going? Who the fuck are you people? What's going on?" While still cognitively aware, Kyle was utterly disoriented by now.

"You're lucky, I guess. Review board called off. You're going to a stationing."

"What 'review board?' What 'stationing?' What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Look, buddy, if I could answer your questions, I would. But I

can't, and the shuttle is waiting. So, move your ass."

The guard led Kyle down several hallways to a shuttle bay. The only one there at the time was of a gray, boxy sort, about the size of a shipping container.

Kyle's attention was drawn to the outside of the shuttle bay. There was a massive door, open to the outside. He could see a seemingly endless expanse of ice, and, in the sky, the planet Neptune. He realized that this shuttle bay must have a pressurized internal atmosphere, as the moon it was positioned on had none whatsoever, not to mention that the temperature must be hundreds of degrees below zero.

Then he saw something else. The guard who had escorted him had, at some point, without Kyle paying attention, put on a spacesuit helmet. Several other personnel were milling about in the shuttle bay, also wearing them. They had walked through an airlock to get here too, Kyle realized.

"Of course," he thought, "I'm not biological. No need for oxygen or the regulation of body temperature. I was built for all-terrain, all-environment survival. Well, guess it's not all bad. If I ever need to climb Mount Everest naked, I'm well equipped."

Kyle loaded onto the craft. The cockpit was inaccessible from the passenger section, which resembled nothing so much as a subway car. As a result of this design, Kyle never saw the pilot, if, indeed, there was one, as the shuttle may have been entirely automated. However, the shuttle did have an AI voice, who narrated to Kyle as he loaded on.

"Welcome, Herr Dellschau. This is Commandant Emmermann's personal shuttle, for ferrying guests to his estate. Above

each bench, you'll notice a slat. This can be flipped up. Beneath them are screens which act as windows so you may observe the outside. Now, please be seated and enjoy the ride."

Kyle sat, and eventually did look out of the slat. He caught a most impressive view of Neptune, before the ship "jumped" into hyperspace. The screens went black during the jump and through the transit to Alpha Centauri, which only took about 15 minutes.

The shuttle stopped again in the orbit of a planet. Kyle stared in wonderment at it. The planet was massive, and seemed to be covered almost entirely in greenery, but with a few small oceans, dividing the planet into 4 enormous continents, all visibly tropical. The ship had stopped on the day side, so no lights could be seen on the surface of the planet, and the ship began to descend.

"Welcome to Centurion," the ship's voice said.

The ship descended rapidly through the atmosphere, and began to fly across the jungle-covered landscape. Kyle was slowly emerging from the mental shock of his previous situation, and watched with interest the landscape that was unfolding.

Eventually, the ship stopped on a landing pad on a cliff side, jutting out from a mountain. Due to the narrowness of the windows, Kyle couldn't see much beyond it.

"Wait a moment. Your escort will be arriving soon," the shuttle's voice said.

"Does this Emmermann own this place?" Kyle asked.

"This landing pad and region are both his."

“What? This entire mountain?”

“This entire mountain range, Herr Dellschau.”

Soon enough, the back door of the shuttle opened, the same through which Kyle had entered. A new man entered. He was tall and black haired, with large hazel eyes. He wore a nondescript black uniform, and extended his hand to Kyle.

“Georg Nimmer. I’m one who did the deed so your ass isn’t on the scrapheap right now,” he said. In spite of the roughness of his statement, he said it cheerfully. He seemed to Kyle to be the first friendly face he’d encountered.

“Kyle Dellschau. Or so they tell me. What is this?”

“My benefactor and yours seems to think you’re worth a lot to him. And that’s where my knowledge ends. Come now, let’s not keep The Old Man waiting.”

It was Kyle’s first time hearing Emmermann be referred to as “The Old Man,” but he’d discover that Georg was not unique in using this nickname.

They exited the shuttle. The landing pad was quite large, perhaps one quarter mile square. At the far end, on the edge of the monstrous outcropping that the landing pad was situated on, was a huge glass elevator that descended down the cliff into the valley below. It was to here that Georg and Kyle walked.

From inside the elevator, Kyle finally observed the valley below as they descended. The valley was thickly jungled, like all of Centurion seemed to be. An enormous portion of the valley was taken up by Emmermann’s house, although that word seemed inadequate. The “house” was a massive white palace in an Eastern European style. It was built around a courtyard, the

center of which housed a huge swimming pool.

"Emmermann is well off," Kyle observed aloud.

Georg chuckled. "Yes, I guess you could say that."

Eventually, the elevator landed, and the pair alighted. Ahead of them, a path was laid out, leading to the front door of the palace. The path led through a tropical garden of sorts, occupied mostly by what appeared to be fruit trees. However, they were not the type of fruit trees found on Earth. These fruits were very large and oddly shaped, in all the colors of the rainbow.

Soon enough, the pair arrived at the massive wooden front door, which opened automatically. The foyer was, somehow, exactly what Kyle had expected. It was enormous and wood paneled, the walls hung all over with antique weapons, particularly curved swords, which Emmermann seemed to have a fondness for, but there were other weapon types too. Musket rifles, battle axes, Bowie knives, and so on. There was also a collection of stuffed animal heads, though they were animals Kyle did not recognize, and he found this entire display to be in very poor taste.

From a door, one of Emmermann's servants appeared. This servant was not human- it was noticeably a robot. It had no legs, rather, it had a pole coming from below its "waist," with 2 wheels at its bottom. Its upper body, arms, and head were all humanoid shaped, and chrome plated.

"Come with me, gentlemen. Mr. Emmermann will see you now," the robot said, in a fairly stereotypical robotic voice, gesturing the men to follow.

They did so, and found themselves in a large office, decorated in much the same fashion as the foyer, with Emmermann behind the desk. He hadn't changed in appearance at all since Kyle's childhood, though he of course had no memory of that.

"Guten Tag, Herr Dellschau," he said cordially, extending his hand.

"Guten Tag. Now please, what the fuck am I doing here?" Kyle didn't believe in filters.

Emmermann chuckled.

"Still the same old Kyle."

"We've met before? I have no memories. My apologies Herr Emmermann."

A slight grin appeared on Emmermann's face at this statement, no doubt now contemplating the ways in which he could manipulate Kyle. He began to do so forthwith.

"Well, what an interesting development. I was not informed. Young Kyle, believe it or not, I was once your favorite person in the world."

"Bullshit," Kyle thought, but said nothing as Emmermann continued.

"There's a new development now, however. You're a synthetic. And not just any synthetic, but apparently more human in your mind than most humans. You're a sentient artificial intelligence, and therefore, a threat to the status quo. You're lucky I have you now."

"Am I? All due respect, I'd like to know what now. Why have you rescued me? And what am I to be expected to do in

return?"

"I rescued you because of that fondness I had of you as a child that you can't remember. And also, I confess, out of your usefulness. You are a unique creature, and a worthwhile addition to my empire."

In an odd way, Kyle admired the honesty. Emmermann saw him as a tool, and Kyle realized this was how he would be treated for the foreseeable future.

"Now, about your future. I have a position on Earth tentatively lined up for you. But first; I want to see you in action. You will do a job for me."

"Or else?"

"Or else, in vernacular English, you're fucked."

Emmermann paused for dramatic effect after this before continuing.

"You'd either be on the scrapheap, or spend your days as a science experiment. Do you want that?"

Kyle didn't reply. It was the kind of question that wasn't a question.

"Well, I see not Kyle. And you see, I'm offering you a job. Something that humans have. Now, shall we discuss business?" Emmermann finished.

Kyle nodded, and discuss business they did. Kyle, it turned out, was to kill seven people, all of the Roundtree family.

Author's note. Roundtree International's enterprise has been described in Volume One. However, this was to be Kyle's first encounter with the family itself. His mission will be related in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

The Roundtree family are one of the biggest and most important families of the ICC. Their origins are murky, however, it is known that they followed a path similar to the Arasaka family; assignment into the research and development of a secret technology during the war, an invitation into space by the fleeing Axis Powers, and an eventual privatization and industrialization of the technology they had been assigned to research, in their case, anti-gravity propulsion, particularly applied to ground based transport.

This led, in 1961, to the establishment of the underground maglev train system that snakes the globe, connecting underground bases and cities. This, of course, was expanded to off-world, so that Roundtree International now has global networks on over 60 planets, and localized networks on thousands more.

The company's head, at the time of Kyle's assignment, was Richard Roundtree. Himself and his wife, Maya Roundtree, née Vasconcelos, had eight children, all of whom except the youngest two were adults by the time of Kyle's assignment. His task was to assassinate the seven oldest. The youngest, a boy called Eric, was considered malleable, and would bend to Emmermann's will when he inherited Roundtree International.

"But why me?" Kyle demanded when he had finally been

given the full assignment.

“Because,” Emmermann replied, “I need to know that you’re all that Shinji promised. And more than that, I need proof of loyalty.”

Kyle, at this point, still had no clue who “Shinji” was. It’s on this note that I feel the need to stress Kyle’s isolation. He had awoken from the vat with no memories or instructions whatsoever on how to proceed. He had been bought and sold without his knowledge, after days of torture, and was now at the mercy of the man who had bought him, a man he couldn’t possibly recognize, who lived on a planet totally unfamiliar to him.

Kyle desperately needed a friend, and he found that in Georg Nimmer. It was to be a lifelong friendship for both of them, from that point on.

After the briefing, Kyle and Georg were dismissed, with the promise of Kyle being sent out to phase one of his assignment the next day, and a winking admonition to Kyle that; “Should he need female company, the maids of the house were generously paid.”

The same robot servant who had led them into Emmermann’s office walked them out to another wing of the house where the bedrooms were located.

Kyle’s room was massive, and decorated in a Ming Dynasty theme. Kyle found himself loving the four-poster bed and huge bathroom, even as he had no real need of either, being synthetic and therefore not having the biological needs for which a bedroom and bathroom are designed, with the exception of if he should choose to avail himself of the “services”

offered by Emmermann. Kyle's insatiable proclivity for the opposite sex had survived the transfer to a synthetic body virtually intact.

Eventually, Georg entered Kyle's room, to help him settle in. After briefly, and somewhat unnecessarily, showing him around, he and Kyle talked. Kyle finally received some information. Everything that Georg told Kyle will eventually become apparent, so I will not recount the conversation. However, when the dinner gong rang after several hours of conversation, Kyle was considerably less "in the dark."

The dinner was expectantly extravagant. Emmermann clearly wanted to impress his new guest, and showcase a few of the benefits he would have access to if his loyalty was proven.

The dining room was in the style of a European banquet hall. The mahogany table must have been capable of seating over 100 people. However, Emmermann, Georg, and Kyle were the only guests that night who enjoyed the dinner which consisted of lobster fritters and cheese tartlets as appetizers, a main course of fine Argentine-style steak, and finally a dessert of white-on-white cake served with fresh, berry-type fruits from Emmermann's garden.

The servers were all human, including one young redheaded woman in the uniform of a French maid. After the dinner, Kyle took Emmermann's suggestion, inviting her up to his room. No doubt used to this, and paid for it, the young woman, named Laura, accepted his invitation, and so Kyle was treated to the first pleasant night he had experienced since awakening from the vat.

However, he also made a rather upsetting discovery. Before relating, it should be understood that I am including this information with Kyle's permission. Kyle discovered that night with Laura that, while his male anatomy looked and functioned the same, if not better, than that of a biologically created man, (with the exception of his not being able to cause pregnancy) it was also prone to mechanical sounds, specifically a tiny mechanical groan from his penis when it was in the process of becoming erect.

While the sound was minuscule, and Laura seemed completely unfazed, it upset him. It made him feel inorganic. A sort of "Sexual Impostor Syndrome" that he would deal with for many years.

The morning came, and Kyle awoke, finding that Laura had gone, before Kyle could even ask her surname. It was an encounter that he still looks back on with a combination of aroused fondness and regret.

Kyle dressed, this time in a simple pullover shirt, jeans, and the boots he had worn the previous day, then showed himself to the ground floor, finding a sitting room where he could wait to be instructed.

He was eventually found by Emmermann, who invited him to breakfast, and afterward, took him to where his and Georg's assignment would begin.

Emmermann first took Kyle down an elevator, hidden rather well beneath a staircase. They found themselves in a sleek white room, in the center of which was a single car on a track. It was about the shape and color of a silver bullet, though of

course it had windows. The room it was in narrowed into a long tunnel, which the track that the bullet-like vehicle was placed on continued along.

The side of the vehicle slid open, and Emmermann and Kyle boarded. The seats inside were positively luxurious, softly cushioned and upholstered in what Kyle guessed was chinchilla.

The vehicle shot down its track, and through the tunnel laid out for it. The ride lasted perhaps five minutes, even at the incredible speed it was traveling at.

The vehicle emerged on a cavernous, rounded room, with a large stargate. Emmermann and Kyle alighted, finding Georg already awaiting them. Emmermann stood before them, in the center of the room, his arms spread, and addressed them.

“Welcome, Kyle, to my base. This is where you’ll operate from.”

Emmermann then began to gesture in turn to the various doors positioned around the room as he spoke.

“In each of these rooms, you’ll find everything you might need. Weapons. Gymnasium. Computer library for information. Communications equipment. And so on. Georg, I leave Kyle in your care. I have business to attend to on Ceradus, and I must leave in the next few hours. Auf weidersehein.”

And so, Kyle was shown around the small yet adequate facility. A few other personnel milled about, but none paid attention to Kyle or Georg. They clearly had their own matters to attend to.

The tour ended in the computer room, which was quite small, with most of the walls covered by monitors, with a single

console in the center. Georg approached the console, clicked a few buttons, and soon all the screens were flooded with information on the various targets Kyle was assigned to kill.

And so, the mission began. The assignment would come to take several months, with Kyle and Georg going after and chasing each of their targets, using the time and space travel capabilities of Emmermann's stargate to track them at vulnerable times in their lives. Let's start with the first of them, the oldest daughter of the Roundtree family, Monica Roundtree.

Kyle and Georg chose to go after her at a time when she was working an internship in a Martian based software company, the name of which Kyle has forgotten in the intervening years. The town, however, was called Coronado, after the founding family, and the time period traveled to was the early 1970s, when Monica Roundtree was in her 20s.

Coronado was a fairly typical Martian town, built underground in the long-dried out lava tube systems that snake across the Martian underground. These lava tubes go miles deep, and are cavernous enough to build towns and cities in, totally protected from the elements and from aerial and orbital bombardment.

Other than being visibly underground, Coronado resembled nothing so much as an average small town in Latin America, with Spanish colonial-style buildings of stone and adobe. Kyle and Georg, using Georg's colonial ID, found accommodation in a stone building across the road from Monica's apartment, and began the process of staking out their target.

Kyle felt a strong guilt during the process of it all, eventually

wondering why he seemed incapable of backing out. He'd one day realize that even he was not immune to that which had been programmed into his synthetic brain. However much he might question or hate his orders, he was, in the end, powerless to refuse them.

It was on the first day of their assignment, holed up and watching Monica's routine from the cheap, undecorated two-room suite they had rented, that Kyle and Georg spoke.

"Georg, how did you find yourself in this business?"

"I was in prison. Here actually, on Mars. The Old Man found me. God knows how, he never said. Though I suspect he combs places in search of those who can't refuse his offers."

"Like me," Kyle thought ruefully. "Who is Emmermann?"

"Good question. I don't even know his real name. And I wonder if he himself even does at this point. I can tell you, that he's one of the most powerful men in Der Bund."

"Der Bund?"

"You really do have amnesia, don't you?"

Kyle chuckled. "I'm afraid so."

"Well. Der Bund is a confederation of planets. Der Bund Freier Deutscher Welten. After the war, some Germans left Earth. Getting away from the fucking Semites. They now control thousands of planets. And our dear benefactor is one of their most powerful figures. Yet so little is known about him."

And so, the men staked Monica Roundtree out. Due to the tumultuous times on Mars, all the windows in Coronado were bulletproof, which made sniping her from across the street impossible, and besides, her death needed to be more final,

more damaging to the body, so damaging that she couldn't be resurrected with a regeneration tank. And out of these necessities, a plan was hatched.

To carry out their plan, Kyle and Georg first had to acquire explosives. To do this, they left Coronado for the settlement of Neu Berlin, underneath Olympus Mons, where Georg had a contact, an arms dealer whom he simply referred to as "Travis."

They took a maglev to Neu Berlin- ironically, ran and owned by Roundtree International.

While Neu Berlin is now a thriving metropolis and the largest city on Mars, in the early 70s, when Kyle and Georg were visiting, it was barely a backwater by Breakaway standards, with perhaps a dozen long streets and only a single skyscraper-sized building. It couldn't have had more than 100,000 inhabitants in those days.

Kyle and Georg arrived in good time, the maglev being on schedule as always. They managed to bypass any security checks at the two train stations they cycled through.

Kyle found Neu Berlin most pleasant, in a quaint sort of way. Most of the buildings and landmarks seemed to be recreations of those found in pre-war Berlin, with the exception of one outer district which was dominated by a number of mansions, as well as one lone skyscraper. All of this, of course, was underground, in one of the intraterrestrial pockets of the dried lava tubes of Mars.

Under Georg's direction, the two men walked through the streets. They found themselves in what seemed to be a rather low-brow district, where most of the inhabitants looked to be

heavily armed.

A lot of the district's inhabitants, Kyle noticed, had robotic enhancements. Robotic eyes, or limbs, or various things attached to their bodies, usually protruding plates of metal. It looked like quite painful stuff, and Kyle wondered why these people would choose to mutilate their bodies with such implants.

What he did not understand at the time was that these people were seeking the same kind of body enhancements that the wealthy of the Breakaway had access to, many of which were manufactured by the same persons who had made Kyle himself. The difference, of course, is that the enhancements enjoyed by the Breakaway elite are generally nanotech-based, and are therefore able to be seamlessly and painlessly applied and integrated into the body. The enhancements available to the poor of the Breakaway, meanwhile, are generally far more crude and primitive affairs, usually acquired on the black market, and nearly always installed by the dealers themselves, rather than by medical professionals. Botched operations are rampant, yet the trade is still engaged in, due to the societal advantages provided by being enhanced.

Eventually, Kyle and Georg stepped into a narrow street, which appeared to be dedicated to commerce. It was lined with shops of all kinds spilling out onto the street, selling seemingly every item one could need. They approached one such shop, in front of which was standing a hulking blonde man with a single robotic eye.

"Travis, meet my new friend Kyle. He and I need to blow

some shit up," Georg said cordially to the robotic-eyed man.

Travis gestured the men into the back of his shop. Far from the poverty that seemed apparent from the outside, the back room of the shop was sleek and all white, the walls lined on all sides with weapons of all kinds, neatly perched on small shelves, or hanging from hooks.

"Welcome to my REAL business," Travis said gloatingly.

Kyle and Georg shopped, finding the arms they needed for their purposes, namely several plasma bombs. Georg paid with a card. The bombs cost a total of 30,000 Bundesmarks, the main currency of the Breakaway. Their shopping complete, they then returned to Coronado to carry out their mission.

In their tracking of Monica, Kyle and Georg had observed a time when she was isolated on a routine basis. Every Wednesday, she was meeting a young man, always well after lights out in the colony, when all private lights were remotely turned off, and only streetlights were lit- a power saving measure, due to the ongoing Mars war.

During this night, (created artificially since the city was underground) Monica would leave her apartment. She would slip away to a Japanese garden near the center of Coronado, to meet a young man. They would inevitably end up on a bridge in the garden.

It was almost too easy. Kyle and Georg simply placed one of their plasma bombs, which had a remote detonator, underneath the bridge, waited for Monica and her young man to meet there, then set off the remote detonator.

An explanation may be necessary. Plasma bombs are

incredibly devastating. Standing next to a plasma explosion is essentially the same as standing next to a tiny supernova. Monica and her contact, as well as the bridge they stood on, were virtually vaporized. The Japanese garden burst into flames, simply from being in proximity to such intense heat.

Needless to say, there was no question of regenerating Monica Roundtree. She no longer existed as a physical person. The young man's name was never known to Kyle or Georg. He was simply "collateral damage" to Emmermann's assignment, and not worthy of consideration.

As a matter of routine, Kyle and Georg returned to Emmermann's house for two weeks, the maximum time during which a recovered body could be regenerated. This was unnecessary in this case, for obvious reasons, but Emmermann didn't believe in exceptions to rules, least of all for those he was using for personal gain.

The next 3 offspring of the Roundtree family, namely Dahlia, Joseph, and Franklin, who were triplets, were all killed together. In 1980, one of their friends, who lived on the largely oceanic planet of New Atlantis, acquired a yacht. This friend took the 3 Roundtrees, as well as an entire group of young people, out on the newly acquired yacht, with no security.

Kyle and Georg, having this information and opportunity, simply planted another of their plasma bombs on this yacht. There were no survivors.

While the names of the remaining persons who died are known, Kyle says he has "blocked them out" due to the trauma and guilt. While all of these people were indeed of ICC families,

and no doubt of an extremely questionable character, the justness of them all dying in their 20s is, at best, highly doubtful.

The killing of the fifth Roundtree, Rose, was the most personal, and therefore the most emotionally difficult to recount. She was killed on a graduate school retreat, about one hundred miles from her family's Centurion estate, in 1986. Kyle and Georg lured her away from her trekking group, using a device that could project voices into the head of the person it was aimed at.

Once Rose had been successfully lured away and isolated, Kyle shot her in the head with a silenced plasma pistol. Then, Kyle and Georg simply buried her. In the heavy jungles of Centurion, locating a body is an impossible task.

The next shock came when it was time to eliminate Samuel Roundtree, the second youngest, and final victim on their list. Once again, he was to be targeted while on a school trip, this one in 1980, in a Chinese colony on Avalon 6, a habitable moon orbiting a brown dwarf in the Sagittarius constellation. The most appalling thing was that they were being asked to kill Samuel when he was 12 years old.

Kyle and Georg were holed up in a cheap hotel room, waiting to strike, when Kyle finally voiced an objection.

"Are we actually doing this? Are we actually killing a child?"

Georg looked up. A long silence followed. Georg was clearly pondering Kyle's question.

"No," Georg said. "We are not."

"How can we avoid it? I'm starting to realize something Georg; I have programming. My mind is a computer after all. I

cannot disobey orders."

Another long pause.

"Then don't. I'm giving you new orders Kyle. And those orders are to follow my lead. I'll take care of this. You're not to do anything. Are my orders understood?"

"Yes Sir. Now, how do we proceed?"

"How else? The black market. There are those on planets like this who create and replace memories for people wanting experiences that they could not otherwise have. We will be taking the boy to one of these persons. Giving him amnesia, like that which you yourself have."

"And then what? Even with amnesia, the boy is still a Roundtree."

"This city has a wall around most of it, Kyle. Open, but serving as a border between this colony and the indigenous population of this planet. We take the amnesiac boy to them. He won't be discovered, most likely. He'll just be another Roundtree who disappeared without a trace."

"And if we're discovered to have disobeyed Emmermann's orders? What then?"

"Then our asses are toast. But we aren't killing a 12 year old boy."

And so they proceeded. They made a trip that night to a few of the less reputable bars of the colony, dressed as obvious tourists, and made their wishes clear to those who inevitably approached them. They made out that they were looking for implanted memory experiences on the cheap, experiences which weren't altogether legal, and therefore required a black

market solution.

Their wishes were granted. The man that Kyle and Georg spoke to at the club, who was clearly some sort of Triad head, gave them the address of the colony's best black market memory maker. Or at least the best that the Triad gentleman was making a commission off of. Either way, their wishes would be met, they were assured.

Kyle and Georg were given the address they were to seek, and then spent the night satisfying themselves with the female company which was readily available in this club, ending their sessions with the ladies of the night by purchasing some drugs that, in correct dosages, would knock a human out. Ostensibly, this was for their own usage, but in reality, it was part of their plan for the young Roundtree.

"How are we affording all this?" Kyle suddenly felt the urge to ask the next morning.

"Simple," Georg replied, "Emmermann gives me unlimited funds for these jobs. Selling your soul pays rather well."

A sobering reality indeed, Kyle thought to himself.

The next day, they went to the address given to them, using a hovering car provided by a car rental from their hotel. The woman they sought had the surname of Yao, they had been told, but used the enigmatic black market nickname of "Nightcrawler."

The address proved to be exactly what they expected. A tiny narrow doorway, situated in between a brothel and a pawn shop that obviously specialized in goods that were conveniently missing their serial numbers, in a district entirely composed of

such places. Kyle and Georg glanced at each other, then simply shrugged and entered. It was their only apparent option.

The interior proved to be no more encouraging than the exterior. They found themselves in what seemed to be a small waiting room, with a group of metal folding chairs against one wall. The floor and walls were concrete, the doors metal, with a metal desk also against the far wall. The only part of the space which didn't seem coldly industrial was a neon sign hanging on a wall, with the name of the business; "Nightcrawler's," first in English, then a translation in traditional Chinese characters.

No sooner had Kyle or Georg entered than a door against one wall opened, and a young Chinese woman emerged. Her hair was dyed pink, and the left half spiked. A small red wire could be seen, coming out from behind her right eye, snaking around her head, then re-entering under the skin at the back of her neck. An obvious cybernetic enhancement of some kind, though a good deal more discreet, and likely far more expensive, than those Kyle had observed on Mars. She wore a black trench coat, and seemingly not much else.

"Nightcrawler, I presume?" Georg said, stepping towards her, hand extended.

The woman didn't accept his hand, merely eyeing him and Kyle up and down. Kyle tried to read her face. Was she displaying attraction or suspicion? Or some mixture of both?

"I suppose you're the two German tourists I was told to expect? I don't normally do business this early in the day." Nightcrawler answered curtly, in Cantonese.

Georg obviously didn't understand, and Nightcrawler was

undoubtedly counting on this.

“Fuck it,” Kyle muttered. They didn’t have time for this. He pulled up Cantonese in the language program of his mind, and began addressing Nightcrawler.

“Alright. The truth, sister. We’re not stupid and rich German tourists. And it’s not us needing your services. We represent the interests of the Emmermann family.”

Nightcrawler’s eyes widened in obvious recognition of that name.

Kyle continued; “You’re going to use your skills to assist us in saving the life of a child. You’ll be handsomely compensated, naturally.”

“And if I should refuse?” Nightcrawler said, eyebrows raised.

“We’ll kill you and move to one of your competitors.” Kyle said flatly. Nothing like a bit of fear to induce cooperation.

“Like I’ve never heard that threat before. But very well. This sounds agreeable enough of an arrangement.” Nightcrawler replied.

“Good,” Kyle said. “And please, speak either English or German for the sake of my friend. Where are your manners?”

Kyle next explained what they wanted, which Nightcrawler objected to.

“Gentlemen, I’m afraid you don’t understand my field. I cannot remove memories as such. Not by themselves. I can only add to them.” Nightcrawler explained.

“Fine,” Georg replied, “you do that. Add as many memories as you can. Replace everything. Drown out the boy’s past. Just so long as he’s forgotten he’s a Roundtree by the end, that’s all

that matters."

The plan was laid out, and the meeting ended with Kyle and Georg walking away with a small vial of the anesthetic drugs given to them by the hookers they had been with, which were a key aspect of both their plan and of Nightcrawler's business. With their scheme solidified, they returned to their hotel to carry it out the following day.

On that day, the young Samuel Roundtree's school trip itinerary included a massive museum. The perfect place for Kyle and Georg to execute their plan. They loaded up a syringe with the anesthetic, and set out.

The museum was quite large, and seemingly had no security. This was an ultra wealthy district of the colony, and it seemed safety was implicitly expected, rather than materially present.

Kyle and Georg kept their distance from the group of children, again appearing as just a pair of German tourists. For a while, they simply wandered the museum, observing the fascinating exhibits. No expense had been spared, creating massive and grand holographic exhibits on the sciences and history of space exploration, from a Breakaway perspective.

Kyle and Georg were strategic, looping through the museum in such a way that the tour group, and therefore Samuel, were always within reach, but never close enough that it would be obvious the two were tailing them. They waited for that moment that occurs in every tour group, but especially one composed entirely of preadolescent boys; the "bathroom break."

It was Kyle who carried out the next stage of the plan. He

“happened” to walk into the bathroom at the same moment as the boys, and quickly located Samuel Roundtree at a urinal. He walked behind the boy, and as he did, administered the anesthetic.

The syringe was a special one, designed for instant and painless administration of whatever was contained within it. By simply walking by at a leisurely pace, acting as though he was looking for an available urinal in the crowded bathroom, Kyle was able to deliver the stuff unnoticed. The boy merely reached up and swatted at his neck for a moment, perhaps feeling as though being bitten by a small bug, then resumed his business and left with the other boys, Kyle following casually. The operation felt extremely bizarre and perverse to him, drugging a child in a bathroom, but he estimated that it was his only choice.

The anesthetic was useful in that it was slow to metabolize, but once it was, the effect was immediate. The recipient would go on as normal for five to seven minutes, then suddenly be hit with overwhelming sleepiness, followed by unconsciousness within seconds. The young Roundtree and his uniformed classmates regrouped, and for a short time, their tour resumed.

Soon, Samuel collapsed. A commotion followed from two teachers and the students panicking at the collapsed boy. Kyle and Georg glanced at each other.

“Now or never,” Kyle said telepathically, and moved to the next stage of the plan.

“Let us through! We’re doctors!” Georg cried, he and Kyle rushing to the collapsed figure on the ground.

An interlude followed, of Kyle and Georg performatively checking the unconscious Samuel's vitals, before Kyle making an announcement.

"This boy is near death. My colleague and I will take him by our car to the nearest hospital." Georg said in a feigned panicked tone.

And before anyone could object, or even absorb his words, Kyle had gathered the boy in his arms, and he and Georg then charged for the doors, loaded into their car, and shot off.

They reached Nightcrawler's place of business quite quickly. It was by then early afternoon. To begin covering their tracks, they left their rented car in the street, with the keys in the ignition. In a neighborhood like this, it'd be stolen very quickly, and therefore out of their hands.

A few people on the streets shot inquisitive or even dirty looks at the sight of two grown men carrying an unconscious 12 year old into Nightcrawler's place of business, but they were not stopped. In a way, Kyle felt disgusted that they were not.

As before, Nightcrawler came to greet the man as soon as they entered the office, this time going to the front door of her office and sealing it. No disturbances allowed that day.

She ushered them next into one of the rooms off the reception area, with a plaque on the door reading "Operations," in Chinese. The room triggered something in Kyle, though he did not know what or why.

In the center was a dentist's chair, at the head of which was what appeared to be a virtual reality helmet, with a mass of wires. Next to the dentist's chair was a complicated array of

small monitors and medical equipment.

“Place the boy in the chair and put the helmet on him. Ensure that his eyes are covered. I need to calibrate the computers. This will take many hours.” Nightcrawler instructed.

Her directions followed, Nightcrawler proceeded to attach a bewildering array of wires to the unconscious Samuel’s body, as well as several IV drips of what Kyle assumed were nanites. Sensing that they were unwelcome, Kyle and Georg filed out of the operations room. They had other concerns anyway.

They returned to the street, and walked the neighborhood a ways, finding the services they knew they needed. First they spent the best part of three hours receiving fake identification from a Serbian man with an office advertising “identity services.” It appeared legitimate, but in this district, it was obvious that it was not, and he served Kyle and Georg without question.

They next found a car dealership, and purchased a cheap, beat up car. This one was clearly stolen, as all of the relevant numbers had been filed off- untraceable, perfect for them. Their business done, they treated themselves at the brothel next to Nightcrawler’s office, then finally returned, about seven hours having passed. With the length of days on this planet, it was still only early-mid evening when they made their return.

They sat in Nightcrawler’s waiting area for at least another four hours, before she finally emerged.

“The boy’s memories have been replaced. I’ve carefully controlled the dosage of his anesthetic. He should awaken in maybe four hours. He’ll have no memories, or very few,

matching the life you snatched him from. From what I witnessed, incredible wealth. I'm sorry to see him taken from this."

With that, she returned to her operations room, and reemerged around 15 minutes later, to announce that Samuel had been disconnected fully from the equipment, and was ready for collection.

As soon as her back was turned, Georg withdrew his plasma pistol and shot Nightcrawler. She didn't suffer. Georg landed both shots perfectly, one to the upper back of her head, and one where her neck met her head. Nightcrawler was dead before even hitting the ground.

Kyle had known this would happen. Nightcrawler had seen too much. Still, his psychic stomach sank at the sight of Nightcrawler's dead weight hitting the concrete floor. Before leaving, he insisted on covering her head with his jacket.

Kyle and Georg loaded Samuel into their car, and set off. It was by now truly nighttime, and the streets were lit only by the myriad neon lights and holograms of the colony.

They drove through the province for about an hour, before reaching the wall which surrounded it. The wall had been built in a forgotten time of great strife between the colonists and the indigenous of the planet. Now, with relations generally warm, the wall was essentially porous, maintained only as a reminder.

A note on the indigenous of the planet; Kyle has forgotten their name, if indeed they even have a unified name. However, they are largely human in appearance, save for their lavender skin and long, prehensile tails. They live at a largely Bronze Age level of development, however, they are quite advanced in

medical technology.

On their map, Kyle and Georg had located a tiny indigenous village perhaps three hours from the colony wall. They found it in their car with little difficulty. The buildings, what few there were, were small, the architectural style being somewhat reminiscent of that of East Asia. They left the young unconscious Samuel on the ground under a tree, facing a house, then simply left, hoping and praying that their admittedly flimsy, last minute plan would be successful.

They returned to Centurion the next day, passing the spaceport using the false identities they had acquired, on the off chance their true identities had been discovered after the kidnapping. They passed the few checks they couldn't dodge without incident, and soon made their way to Emmermann's private stargate, and so returned from the colony of their mission, in 1986, to Centurion in 1984.

They were greeted by a smiling and clearly pleased Emmermann.

"Gentlemen! You have returned. Your mission was a success?"

"Yes," Kyle replied. Being an espionage unit synthetic, his systems were calibrated so that he could lie perfectly, with no chance of being detected by any of the conventional methods.

"Splendid! Lunch is in an hour, so please clean up, men. We have much to discuss."

They showered, then went to the dining room, as they instinctively knew Emmermann would have wished them to do, even though it was still quite early. Sure enough, they found

him already seated at the head of the table, and then took their seats as well.

Emmermann looked up from the book he was reading.

"I know, you know," he said flatly.

"Excuse us, Sir? You know what?" Kyle asked, hoping that perhaps Emmermann was referring to something besides the obvious. His hope died almost before it was born.

"I know that young Samuel Roundtree wasn't killed. Oh, you hid it quite well. But you made one mistake; forgetting that I have future intel. You see, 10 years after your operation, or 12 years from now, a documentary is made. A film crew discovers and makes a film about a human boy, raised by the indigenous of the planet it was filmed on. The same planet where Samuel Roundtree vanished. Human boy also looks the same as him."

"Well," Georg interjected, "suppose you're correct, Sir. Your orders didn't say to kill all the Roundtree offspring. It said to "eliminate" them. And we've done that."

A slight grin appeared on Emmermann's face.

"Yes you have. Precisely."

A silence fell on the table for several long moments before Emmermann finally spoke again.

"It is this unconventional thinking, precisely, why I employ you men. Particularly you, Kyle. You're safe this time. And your assignments will continue."

At that moment, the dining room door opened, and the wait-staff entered, bearing lunch. Emmermann urged Kyle and Georg to eat in peace, then see him after lunch in his office, for further assignment.

They went to the office, Georg entering first. Kyle waited in the hallway. He still halfway expected to hear a telltale gunshot, that Emmermann had waited for the element of surprise to exact his punishment. Kyle began to formulate a plan for escape. He would simply run, he decided. Surely, with the super strength afforded by his body, he could overpower Emmermann's guards? And surely, with all the skills uploaded into his data bank, he could manage to be lost and then eke out an existence in Centurion's jungles?

However, he needn't have worried. Soon enough, the office door opened, and Georg reemerged, looking slightly perturbed, but otherwise none the worse for wear. Kyle entered next, and was promptly addressed by Emmermann.

"Kyle, my boy, congratulations. You are being given a new job. A permanent posting. Of course, I'll occasionally pull you out if I have need of your services. But these will merely be supplemental to your permanent job."

"And what, Sir, is this permanent assignment? And where?" Kyle was tired of cryptic pronouncements.

"You're to be a bodyguard of sorts. Escorting people on operations, guarding them as they do jobs similar to those you have just done. You will also do some missions yourself, I should imagine. As for where; a place called Montauk."

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Many things. You will learn them as you go. However, there are two reasons why you have been given this job. The first is that my grandson will also be at this facility in the near future. The second is that, according to my intel, regime change is on

the horizon at this facility. I already have some influence there. That's how I got you this job. But I want more. You, Kyle, are to be my eyes and ears in Montauk. Make friends and become influential."

And this is what came to pass. The next morning, Kyle was loaded onto one of Emmermann's private transport craft, along with a few changes of clothes, and a few books that he had taken, with permission, from the house's library.

The ship then set off for this mysterious new place called Montauk. He didn't realize the true nature of this place, nor even what star system it was in. Only the sparse info given by Emmermann. But he knew, somehow, that his life would be defined by whatever followed.

Author's note. A long chapter indeed, and quite disturbing. This is a real look at life as a slave in the Secret Space Program.

Chapter 5

The transport arrived within the hour of Kyle leaving Centurion, revealing that the mysterious location known as Montauk was in a star system quite close to Alpha Centauri. Unlike the vehicle that had taken him from Triton to Centurion, this one had no windows, and the pilot or ship AI did not at any point talk to Kyle, so the location's appearance was a total mystery until the back door of the craft was opened.

Kyle found himself in what, at the outset, were beautiful surroundings. He was on a high bluff overlooking an ocean, on what seemed to be an island's peninsula. Perhaps a quarter mile along the bluff from the landing pad, on a second peninsula, a huge lighthouse was visible. Kyle then looked to his left, onto the island itself. It was rather heavily forested, though fairly flat in this area, although a few hills were barely visible in the distance. Several buildings were visible in the tangle of trees, and above them, the top of a radar tower was standing out. It was evening, with the sun just setting. The sounds of life and activity could be heard emanating from the various buildings.

Altogether, a very pleasant scene. Yet Kyle somehow felt a sense of foreboding. No, more than that. A confused, yet chilling feeling. Why was such a beautiful and peaceful looking place a scene of such political unrest, if Emmermann's report

was to be believed?

Kyle stood waiting on the landing pad, holding the single large duffle bag he had left Centurion with. Quite soon, he saw someone approaching along the footpath coming towards the landing pad. A young girl Kyle judged to be perhaps 11 years old, and dark skinned. Kyle conjectured she was of North Indian stock. She wore American Air Force fatigues, and Kyle noticed, with a start, 2 medals on the left breast. Was she a child soldier?

The girl reached Kyle, and extended her hand to him.

"You must be Kyle Dellschau? I'm Sondra Saunders-Roth. I'm escorting you to your new quarters. Follow me, please."

Kyle accepted her outstretched hand, impressed in a way by the girl's seeming precociousness.

"I am he. They let girls your age work? What if I were to have ill intentions?"

The young miss Saunders-Roth rolled her eyes.

"Mr. Dellschau, you'll find that apparent age has no bearing in this place. I'm a grown and married adult. Now, let us commence your tour." And with that, Sondra spun on her heel, and began to half walk, half march along the footpath from which she had arrived, with Kyle in tow.

The path took them through a decent part of the facility, at least that which was above ground. Sondra promised that there was far, far more beneath their feet, and implied that what was below ground was less pleasant than that on the surface.

The path wandered quite sensibly, avoiding the forests, and instead showing mostly the many buildings that made up this base, which Sondra explained was known in proper parlance as

Camp Hero, which is what I'll be referring to it as from here on out, not only in the interests of propriety, but also in order to avoid the pop culturalized term "Montauk."

Kyle and Sondra walked past a number of barracks and apartment buildings, as would be expected. However, many were made to house aliens, which surprised Kyle. This place seemed to have everything. An assortment of canteens, several stores, buildings guarded by barbed wire which Sondra indicated were armories or scientific research facilities, and many other, unlabeled buildings which Kyle didn't yet know the purpose of, as Sondra never elaborated on them.

Eventually, the two reached a sort of roundabout in the path, at the center of which was what appeared to be a community garden. Beside the roundabout was an elongated light blue clapboard building with a massive chimney rising from the back of it.

Kyle was drawn to this building, not by the construction itself, but by the scene it presented. The double doors were open, and a crowd inside was spilling out onto the roundabout, all listening with rapt attention to the voice inside, which Kyle saw belonged to a Chinese woman, singing, in a strikingly angelic, voice Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love with You."

"That's the concert hall. Samantha Li singing tonight," Sondra said, noticing Kyle being pulled toward the building.

"Special occasion?" Kyle asked.

"It's Walpurgisnacht. You didn't know? I thought you were German."

Kyle shrugged. “I suppose you could say my life has been short and isolated.”

Kyle and Sondra continued their tour, until reaching a large, gray concrete building, covered largely in vines, and with what resembled a garden growing on the roof. There was one massive metal door on the side facing the path, with the numbers “216” painted above it in black paint. Outside the door was a single barber’s chair. One could clearly hear festivities coming from the inside, and through the open door Kyle glimpsed what looked like large amounts of people and food.

“This is the German single men’s barracks,” Sondra said. “Your new home. And here I am to leave you, Mr. Dellschau. We’ll likely meet again eventually.”

And with that, Kyle was left to his own devices. Deciding he didn’t have much choice, he walked up to the imposing barracks, past the barber’s chair, and through the open metal door, into the concrete block itself.

The inside was, as the sounds betrayed, housing a raucous celebration. German dance songs from the jazz age were blasting from a red Victrola record player, placed precariously on the edge of a table. Several such tables had been set up, laden with German food. The bunks which obviously took up much of the space on normal days had been pushed aside, so creating a dancing space on the concrete floor. Most of the partakers in the festivities were uniformed, in a mix of both SS and Air Force uniforms, making Kyle feel rather self conscious, in his jeans, T-shirt, and cheap sports jacket.

“Hello? New arrival?” a voice at his left elbow said.

Kyle turned to see an older man in an SS uniform smiling and holding a clipboard. Behind the man, so to the left of the entrance, was a small alcove of sorts, with a desk and chairs, and a crude plaque hanging from the ceiling with “Registration” printed on it in German.

“Is it that obvious?” Kyle asked sheepishly.

“Well, yes,” the man replied. “We need to get you registered. Then you can join in on the fun.”

The man cordially ushered Kyle into the alcove, one wall of which was dominated by a Nazi flag. His Nazi programming intact, and likely even reinforced by that sight in his electric brain, Kyle felt a strong pride, and saluted before the Nazi flag before sitting to be registered.

The registration was fairly succinct, taking no more than 15 minutes. First, Kyle’s handprint was taken, using the usual ink method. Then, the man entered Kyle’s relevant information into the computer sat on the desk. He took Kyle’s name and assignment, and upon learning of his status as a synthetic, extracted all the information Kyle knew about his factory of origin. He next took from his desk a device which looked rather like an old View-Master, save for a wire coming out of it. The SS man plugged it into the computer, then instructed Kyle to look into the viewfinder. This device served the purpose of taking the signature of Kyle’s eyes, for retinal scanning.

One rather disturbing incident of the registration was when the SS man produced a small flashlight and looked at the roof of Kyle’s mouth, noting down Kyle’s serial number which was tattooed there. Kyle had previously been completely unaware of

this number, and immediately hated it. It felt so very inhuman.

The relevant information entered, the man handed Kyle a wristband printed by the computer, and instructed him to wear it.

"You'll receive a proper pass tomorrow, once you're more settled. Your assigned bunk is 318, which is two levels down. Your basic measurements were sent in ahead of time, so you'll find a uniform there, as well as a welcome gift from the men. Please, get settled in, and enjoy the festivities. Happy Walpurgisnacht, Herr Dellschau."

"Happy Walpurgisnacht, Herr- I apologize, I've missed your name," Kyle replied.

"Schräder. Hauptmann Schrader, actually. Not Herr."

"Very well then, Hauptmann Schräder. Sieg Heil."

"Sieg Heil."

Kyle decided to change clothes to blend in before joining the party. The concrete block that the barracks was made of, he discovered, actually had three levels below the ground level the party was on. The first two were comprised of more bunks, each bunk stacked four-high. The bottom level was divided in two, with one half consisting of numerous shower heads from the ceiling, with a single valve at one end to turn on the water, and the other half consisting entirely of toilets and sinks.

The entire place was concrete all-round, very bland, and there appeared to be no privacy anywhere, as even the toilets were open. However, every inch was spotlessly clean, and the men had made attempts at decorating their bunks in various ways, which lessened the potentially depressing drabness of the

place.

The lack of privacy did have a rather amusing outcome, however. Kyle reached the second subterranean level, to find that a number of couples from the party upstairs had the same idea, and were engaged in carnal activities openly on the bunks. Sensing this was normal, Kyle simply chuckled and moved on. However, he was stopped short when he discovered that the bunk rack which his assigned bunk was on had one of the amorous couple situated on the bottom bunk, making ascent impossible. He stood for a moment, then loudly cleared his throat.

The woman, a tall blonde, looked up.

“Either join in or move along,” she said tersely.

“Is the join in offer a serious one?” Far be it for Kyle to pass up a sexual release.

“If you wish, yes. Just keep off of me,” the olive complexioned man of the couple said.

Kyle shrugged, dropped his duffle bag, and joined in, more to end it all and clear his bunk faster than anything. It was successful, as the couple, likely somewhat embarrassed afterward, immediately left, allowing Kyle to reach his bunk. He did indeed find a set of Air Force fatigues and a pair of combat boots set out for him, which he dressed in. There was also a set of pajamas for the night.

On the bunk was also the promised welcome gift, a simple small package, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with twine. He unwrapped it to find a small box, and a folded note.

“For if you ever lose track of time.

Signed, the boys of Battery 216."

"What an odd thing to say," Kyle thought. He opened the box.

Inside was a simple but very nice gift. A Seiko wristwatch, with a brown leather band and a sleek white and silver face. He gratefully put it on, then finally returned up to the party, leaving his duffle bag on the bunk.

The party proved enjoyable, if rather overwhelming for Kyle. He was not used to such noise. The food consisted of bratwursts and sauerkraut for the main meal, and then a bewildering array of cakes and desserts. This was washed down with real German wine and real German beer that someone had somehow brought into Camp Hero.

All through the party, the little red Victrola ran constantly. Whenever a record stopped, someone always immediately rushed to change it for another. Music was important to these people, Kyle was beginning to see. What he found somewhat odd was the range of music. Far from being all German music, as one would expect, songs in many languages were played, particularly Cantonese, Spanish, and English. Even more bizarre to Kyle was that these officers seemed to know all of the songs.

Finally, Kyle chose to put aside shyness and probe the man he'd spotted who he had a feeling would know the most. One of the few people not in uniform, this tall dark haired man was in lederhosen and sat on a stool in the corner, tweaking a banjo. A Cocker Spaniel sat at the foot of the stool, covering its eyes with its paw, clearly trying to sleep in the uproar.

Kyle approached and extended his hand. “How do you do? Kyle Dellschau.”

The man extended his hand in return. “Erik Holtz,” he said. “You must be that newcomer I hear so much about.”

“Yes. I’m curious about the selection of music. So very eclectic. I guess I’m asking how this came to be?”

Erik Holtz chuckled.

“They didn’t tell you much about your new posting, did they? Well, Herr Dellschau, the fact is that nearly every song you’re hearing on that record player came from here. From Camp Hero. We’re one of the music producing capitals of the world. You’ll likely be encouraged to write some for yourself, I’d wager.”

“I see,” Kyle said, with little to no more understanding than when he’d approached the man in lederhosen.

The dog noted Kyle’s approach, and began sniffing him.

“This is Stella. My pride and joy,” Erik said, giving the dog a head pat. “She seems to find you irresistible.”

Kyle chuckled. “Many women do.”

The night pressed on, and Kyle began to slowly settle in and make friends, always watching and noting everything, as he’d been ordered to do.

There was a moment of surprise when he saw someone he recognized, from one of the portraits which hung in the halls of Emmermann’s Centurion. He towered above even Kyle’s own six feet and seven inches, with striking blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. The Aryan ideal.

Kyle approached and met him out of curiosity. The man was

Emmermann's son, he discovered, and went by the name of Jack Flynn. He had many postings, Montauk being but one. He kept this posting so as to keep an eye on his son, Andrew, who was nine years old at the time, and stationed at Camp Hero.

"They have nine year old workers here?" Kyle asked incredulously.

"This place is primarily a training and exploitation ground for children to be used. One day, they'll be like us. Herr Dellschau, were you not in a place like this as a child?"

"I'm synthetic. I never was a child. I suppose you could say, I don't know much about this place. Your father said little."

A thoughtful look spread over Jack's face for several moments before he spoke again.

"Kyle, was it? You seem a decent sort. Stick with me. This shithole is not made for the uninitiated."

Kyle shrugged, then accepted. Perhaps Emmermann had intended this outcome. Or perhaps not. Either way, it was an insider connection, and Kyle was grateful for it, and while he didn't know it at the time, it was the beginning of a long and storied friendship.

The last notable moment of the night came not long after. Growing tired of the crowds, Kyle wandered away, eventually finding a small staircase which led to the roof of the battery. On top, he found the garden he had glimpsed earlier. It consisted mostly of small, ornate plants, with a small patch also growing herbs and cherry tomatoes. There was one large lemon tree in a massive pot painted in the Mexican style.

Kyle's first attention was to the sky, however. To his surprise,

it was unchanged from when he'd arrived. The same sunset hovered in the sky. He'd stood staring at it for a few moments when he heard a woman's voice behind him.

"Beautiful sky, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kyle replied, not yet turning around.

"Ah, well, don't fall in love with it too much. You'll be sick of it, assuming you stick around, Newcomer." the female voice said.

"I was noticing that. Why is that? Are we on a tidally locked planet?" Kyle asked.

"Didn't tell you much before coming here, did they? Damn. Well, bring me a light, and I'll tell you anything." Said the woman.

"Sorry to say, I don't have one," Kyle said. "But I-" his words were stopped short as he turned around and saw, sitting on the rim of the lemon tree's massive pot, what he thought must be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

She was about a foot shorter than Kyle, he guessed, though the white high heels she wore elevated her by several inches. She was very light skinned, her shoulder-length wavy hair a light auburn color, and her eyes a cool, oceanic blue. Her body was slim and toned, with Kyle noting that she was probably quite strong. He could see her arms, because unlike most of the partygoers, she was not uniformed, but rather wore a full-skirted and sleeveless knee length white dress with a pattern of red and pink roses.

"Cat got your tongue?" she asked at Kyle's sudden silence.

Kyle caught himself. "I was just thinking how you'll dirty

your dress, sitting in the dirt like that."

"You Germans are all the same, aren't you?

And I suppose they never told you about dry cleaning either, if they never told you to keep a fucking lighter on hand for a lady. Isn't that right, Newcomer?" she asked with a grin. "Well, come keep me company anyway. I couldn't stand the crowds any longer."

Kyle chuckled slightly, then with a shrug, sat next to the beautiful woman. Surprising even himself, he had no ulterior or sexual motives. This woman was intriguing entirely by herself.

"Well, let's start with names. I'm Herr Kyle Dellschau. Or so they tell me. What do they call you?"

"They call me Norma Jean. Or Norie, or NJ. Take your pick. My surname is Pearce."

Kyle: "I see. Now, what is up with the sky? I could swear even the cloud formations haven't changed in the hours since I arrived."

Norma Jean: "Well, Newcomer, we're in a time bubble. On Earth. There's a barrier separating us from linear time. A time freezing zone, so to say. They can do what they will in here, in Camp Hero, and not affect the timeline, or so Nicholas says. You'll be meeting him soon, I expect. Good luck."

Kyle: "You don't like him much?"

Norma Jean nearly choked on her own laughter at this question.

"No. But of course I can't say that in public. All this you see before you? Bratwurst and lemon trees and nice parties? Complete bullshit. You'll learn that much soon enough, Newcomer."

Following this, Kyle and Norma Jean made a few awkward attempts at small talk, then largely gave up and sat in silence, staring out at the expanse before them. Eventually, they dutifully returned to the party, which was slowly winding down.

Kyle made a few more brief introductions that night. There was the German Anya Mittelbraun, who trained many people. Anya's American husband, Brian Foster, who apparently was an expert on combat in space. Their daughter, McKayla, who Brian declared to be a great singer. There was Jacobo Coronado, a Martian-Argentine stationed at Montauk to comb for assets for his family's business. There was Gregory Mulgrave, a soldier and, reportedly, quite the ladies man, whom Kyle imagined would become either one of his closest friends or one of his closest rivals. All these and more would become key figures in Kyle's life, however the introductions at this party were so brief, that I will allow them to be further introduced more organically as the narrative goes on.

The night ended as many had before, and many more would. The ladies all returned to their barracks, while the men went down to their bunks, stripped naked, and went to the showers, with instructions to leave their uniforms or fatigues in neat bundles at the feet of their bunks, to be gathered by the laundry staff and cleaned while they showered.

The process was quite slow, as the showers were not enough to accommodate all the men, who numbered nearly 2,000. This resulted in most of them simply standing around, stark naked, waiting to enter the crush beneath the shower heads , which would periodically change to blowing warm air, to dry everyone.

This inefficiency was likely partially engineered, as it gave the laundry staff ample time, and upon return to their bunks, their uniforms and/or fatigues were ready for them, alongside their pajamas, which they donned before climbing into their bunks. A silver humanoid shaped robot would then make the rounds, doing a headcount to ensure all were safely in bed, before all lights would go out for the night. And so passed Kyle's first hours at Montauk.

Author's note. An important chapter indeed, finally introducing, from Kyle's perspective, that which is the focal point of this entire undertaking. It also introduces a number of important figures in his life, who'll be around in some capacity for a long time to come.

Chapter 6

The following morning began approximately how the night before had ended. The barracks lights switched on all at once, as abruptly as they had gone off the night previously, and an alarm began blaring, once again voiced over by instructions to strip, shower, dress, and then to head to the "registration" desk in order to receive the assignment sheet for the day.

They did so, naturally. Many of the men grumbled at their assignment. Kyle found the arrangement rather odd. Were jobs here truly so impermanent that they changed every day?

When Kyle reached the desk, one of the two men working it and handing out assignments pulled him aside for a moment and produced a syringe, filled with a dark blue liquid.

"Nanites. These will serve as the your new permanent pass, replacing that wristband. If your clearance level should change, these will be removed, and new nanites put in. To use, simply hold your hand or wrist up to a biometric scanner. Now, hold out your arm please."

Kyle did so, and the man injected his arm, then handed Kyle a small and folded packet of papers, which he produced from an inside pocket of his uniform.

"Your assignment," he said, with a dismissive wave. And so Kyle left, to examine the pages issued outside the barracks. He

was still slightly disconcerted to exit and find the same exact sky as when he'd arrived.

The pages Kyle had been given laid out his instructions for the day, as well as a map of the upper level of the facility, which was even larger than he had imagined. The tour he'd been given had been utterly incomplete. The orders he was issued began with; "Report to Commander Nichols's office, Central Tower." Kyle set out to do this, but had walked less than ten feet before he was intercepted by a young woman. It took him a moment, but he realized it was once again Sondra Saunders-Roth, the girl who had shown him to the barracks, except that she was now an adult, and now in dress uniform, though it still bore no insignia or rank markers.

"Hello, Mr. Dellschau. I'm to show you to the Commander's office," Sondra said.

Kyle was confused. Why should he need a chaperone, when he already had a map and instructions?

The pair took a different path to the one they had the previous night, this one snaking to the "Central Tower," which was the radar tower. Many readers will no doubt already be familiar with this infamous landmark.

As the pair started to approach, they began to hear certain sounds which alerted Kyle's interest and gave him a sense of concern, namely the sounds of excited dogs and an ever growing group of ground vehicles, neither of which he could yet see. Kyle's concern grew as the cries of children began to join these sounds. His concerns were not abated by Sondra's next statement.

“As we approach and enter the tower, you will see some things which may disturb you. There’s been a supply run. A gathering of children. This is routine. Any attempts on your part to disturb the proceedings will result in you being put down with a cattle prod by one of the guards. So please, Mr. Dellschau, keep your hands to yourself. You can’t change anything.”

Kyle and Sondra rounded the last building blocking their view and emerged into the most disturbing scene Kyle had ever witnessed, at least in his memory.

Before them was a short piece of the road which led to the radio tower. The tower itself was fenced off with barbed wire, as was a large area around it which was paved. A single gate stood open in the fence, connecting the road and the pavement, creating a sort of a parking lot.

Within the parking area, a series of black vans had parked at the edge near the gate. These were being unloaded of scores of human children, in various states of trauma and breakdown. Many were screaming and crying, but many also appeared too weak to do this, with some even being carried by small groups of other children. Kyle wondered whether some of these children were even alive still. And the stench! The stench of human waste permeated this area of the compound from the moment the vans were opened to unload their precious cargo.

The sides of the parking lot, and much of the road leading to it, were lined with soldiers bearing bayoneted rifles, German Shepherds, and cattle prods approximately the size of the children they were used to threaten. These children were being

marshaled into the tower through a small door, albeit slowly, as the crush made it difficult for them to fit in the door.

Kyle did not understand the scene at the time, but it was clear to him that these children had come a long distance in these vans, and had been unable to even have the dignity of a toilet on their journey, and, he surmised, from the state of collapse many were suffering, no food or drink had been issued either.

Kyle and Sondra went around the perimeter of the fence to the far side of the tower. Kyle was too shocked and numbed by what he had just seen to react to it.

On the far side of the fence was another gate, smaller than the one through which the vans drove. Kyle and Sondra entered this gate, then went into the tower via a side door, again different from the one the children had entered. Before them lay a staircase descending into an abyss. Kyle was surprised at the poor lighting in what had seemed to be such a well funded and futuristic facility.

Sondra produced a small flashlight, and the pair descended the stairs single file. At the bottom, which was quite a long trek away, was a metal door and retinal scanner. Kyle and Sondra both used it, then entered through the door which opened, finding themselves in a hallway of offices. The hallway itself was lit scarcely better than the staircase they had just descended, with its only lighting coming from the offices which lined it.

As they marched down the hallway, Kyle began noting the names on the doors; Bielek, Dupree, Simmons, Monowitz,

Constantine, Chan, and so forth. The elite officer class of Camp Hero. Kyle particularly noted one office door bearing the name of Roth. Must be Sondra's husband, Kyle supposed.

Eventually, they reached the end hallway. The plaque on the blue wooden door read: "Preston Nichols (Nicholas.)" Kyle supposed this was the Nicholas that the mysterious Norma Jean had made reference to, and whom his assignment packet had sent him to.

Sondra wordlessly opened the door and gestured for Kyle to enter. He did, finding an office that seemed larger than that which seemed possible from the outside. Behind the desk sat an enormous man, dark haired, dark eyed, and as Kyle could immediately tell, dark souled. He must be Nicholas.

Another man stood at his side, also large, but not fat. This man was sandy haired, and only slightly less off-putting in the essence he projected. Both looked up as Kyle entered.

"You are dismissed. I must meet our new arrival," Nicholas said in a heavy Long Island accent, waiving off the sandy-haired man, who nodded at Kyle as he left.

Sondra continued standing in the doorway, and Kyle caught a look shot between her and the sandy haired man. The look, combined with his own psychic sense, told him a great deal. Sondra and this man had a past. One which had begun amicably, but was now in a period of strained turmoil. He guessed that this was her husband, the unknown "Roth" whose name plaque he had seen in the hallway.

Sondra then left, shutting the door behind her, leaving Kyle and Nicholas alone. Kyle walked and seated himself before the

desk, studying the man, who without them even having spoken yet, Kyle could tell was the most vile creature he had ever laid eyes on. Not in appearance; Nicholas was actually rather handsome, though his waistline was becoming more disproportionate than is generally desirable. Rather, it was his output. Had this come at a more mature time in his life, Kyle would have described it as an "aura" or a "vibe." Now, the only words coming into his mind were "fucking revolting."

"You don't like me, do you, Tin-Man?" Nicholas said, breaking the silence. He was no fool. So, Kyle responded in kind.

"No, sir, can't say that I do. But that's not my job. However I will remind you that my name is Kyle. Not 'Tin-Man' as you call me." Kyle replied evenly.

"Yes, you synthetics always are so protective of your names. I suppose that's the closest to humanity as you'll ever get." Nicholas said sardonically.

Kyle tensed. "I do wonder, Nicholas, how your boss who brought me in would feel about your use of racial epithets?"

Nicholas let out a wet, snorting laugh at this. Even his laughter was revolting.

Nicholas: "Heard all this before, I see."

Kyle: "No, Sir. I just have the benefit of not being a fucking idiot."

Another wet guffaw.

Nicholas: "Well. Today isn't your lucky day, my metallic friend. Emmermann is not my boss. He's an infectious shit worm whom I can't defy. So, in short, I can say whatever the fuck I want. Now, down to brass tacks. Let's discuss your job."

Kyle: “Yes. That is the reason I came in to begin with.”

Terms were discussed. While Kyle was owned by Emmermann, and was partially protected by this, he worked for Camp Hero, and therefore was required to do everything that might be ordered by Camp Hero’s officers, so long as it did not contravene his contract.

Kyle was classed as a foreign contractee, in what he was beginning to see was actually a rather complicated caste system. His place in it was what he himself now terms as; “disconnected, yet enslaved, yet oddly privileged.” His standing was not free, yet far above that of the children and most of those who had grown up at Camp Hero. Kyle had, for example, the freedom to walk on the base alone, and spend his free time how he chose. On the other hand, he was in the position of having no freedom whatsoever in his work, no payment, and no real possessions of his own. This, combined with the horrific scene he had witnessed above, made it all too obvious why the “regime change” which Emmermann spoke of was inevitable.

At the end of the talk, Nicholas gave Kyle another packet of papers, including a new set of maps, these of the sub-levels.

“One last thing,” Nicholas said as Kyle got up to leave, “do you make music, Tin-Man?”

“I have a music program in my brain,” Kyle replied.

“Good. The man who left as you arrived is my Chief Cultural Officer. Ivan Roth. If you can make music, you’re expected to, here. You’re to see him. He’ll show you our studio. If you at any point write a song, you’re required to make a recording in the studio.” Nicholas said in dismissal.

Nicholas left out, of course, that all these songs were then forfeit to be sold to whomever the Camp Hero elite saw fit, though the music he had heard the previous night told Kyle as much already.

Turned loose, and with this idea in his head now, Kyle walked to Roth's office. Roth, understanding the orders from Nicholas, showed Kyle next to the Camp Hero recording studio. It was on the walk to the studio that Kyle began to get a sense of the underground portion of the base. The impression it left was uniformly negative, at least of this level. The halls were lit very poorly, or conversely, too brightly. These halls also seemed to wind about endlessly, with no signage visible anywhere except for occasional names on doors.

It was only through Roth that Kyle learned that they were on the second sub-level. It was known as the prestige level, as all the elites, except a few independent contractors, had their offices here. The only break in the offices was a large medical area, with a bank of regeneration tanks, and eventually, the recording studio.

By contrast, the studio was warmly lit, and all parts but the recording booth itself were decorated. The walls and ceilings were lined all over with album covers and posters for specific songs. In the center of each cover or poster was a photo, who Kyle surmised must be the person at Camp Hero who had originally written and/or recorded the songs before they were sold to various record labels. Kyle was slightly amused by the numerous Chinese albums written by obviously non-Chinese assets.

The equipment itself was all state of the art. Indeed, some of

it was clearly alien in nature, such as the small record player with headphones which Roth remarked could edit a record telepathically.

Roth: “What instruments are you capable of playing?”

Kyle: “I have all the important ones programmed in.”

Roth: “Impressive. Well, we have a library from which you may choose, or you may import them from your missions. Just no wind instruments are allowed here, and all imported instruments must be inspected by Anastasia or myself. Instrument library is on sub-level 3, same as your office.”

Kyle: “Anastasia?”

Roth: “Ah yes. Some also call her Janis. That is a name of a fractal of hers. But her original name is Anastasia, and will always be so here.”

Roth walked to a record on the wall and pointed to one of the pictures in the middle, indicating a young woman with long and wild strawberry blonde hair, seated on a log and playing a guitar.

“One of our best,” Roth said. “You’ll get to know her. Now, here is where I leave you. You’re to find your way to your office. The maps provided should be sufficient. See you around, Tin-Man.”

And so Kyle was left alone, to begin finding his way through the bizarre and in many ways hellish place that was Camp Hero in 1984.

Author’s note. A short chapter to introduce two of the most important (and infamous) figures in the memories of Camp Hero survivors, and also the music aspect which was so key to Camp Hero life.

Chapter 7

I've struggled to determine where to insert this next passage, namely a rundown of the caste system of Camp Hero during the Reign of Terror period. So I will proceed here, naming the different classes within the Camp Hero caste system, from top to bottom. All the percentages recorded are reflective of the time Kyle arrived, in spring of 1984, and these statistics remained roughly the same until the end of the Reign of Terror.

1. "Officers." The very highest level of the caste, being composed of the military officers and their families who ran Camp Hero. Typically, though not always, the family members would become high-level contractors for outside powers, bringing even more money into the family, and therefore Project Phoenix. This class numbered at around 3,000, thereby making up around 1% of the Camp Hero population.

2. "Contractors." Both highly paid and high paying persons at Montauk, most often on non-military contracts. Typically representatives of Breakaway corporations, or various intelligence agencies or spacefaring mercenary organizations, both human and alien, with companies ran by the off-world Axis particularly represented. Most "contractors" were at Camp Hero to shop for labor for their own companies and causes, or conversely, because they themselves had loaned their workers

or slaves to Project Phoenix and wanted to oversee them. There were a few exceptions to this trend however, such as top scientists and a few highly specialized technicians. This class also constituted about 1% of the population, and were fairly seamlessly integrated with the Officer class, albeit more diverse.

3. “Lower Officers.” Other military personnel of rank who most often were employed as department heads and mission directors, as well as instructors, and often the class most responsible for the trauma of Camp Hero’s slaves. Lower Officers constituted the smallest group, at around 0.5% of the population, or around 1,500 individuals.

4. “Enlisteds.” Military personnel of lower or no specific rank, who were not enslaved but were brought in and paid very low sums, usually for work as spies, soldiers, and technicians. These constituted one of the largest classes, being about 50,000 strong, or approximately 16% of Camp Hero’s population in the Reign of Terror era.

5. “Subcontractors.” (Both foreign and domestic.) Persons of non-military contracts brought in to perform tasks similar to Enlisteds, though Subcontractors tasks were more diverse, as these also were sometimes given jobs related to the arts or training, as well as most lower ranked security positions, and the majority of handler positions. The persons of this class usually fell under the ownership of those of the Contractor class, listed above. Kyle himself counted among this class, which at the date of his arrival, constituted about 20% of Camp Hero’s population, or about 60,000 persons.

6. “Creoles.” Non-enslaved persons at Camp Hero born of

one slave and one person of another class, with the person of the non-enslaved class nearly always being Lower Officers and up, as creoles born of anything lower usually became slaves by default. Creoles were not paid well, nor given good jobs, and most were shipped out or bought out by other projects in childhood, although a very few did rise through the ranks. Most of the minority who were kept, however, occupied menial office tasks, or oversaw the slaves who carried out unskilled labor. Creoles occupied a maximum of 5% of the population, or no more than 15,000 people.

Below these were the three slave classes, who accounted for the remaining 55-60% of Camp Hero's population. Due to poor record keeping, as well as high amounts of overlap, I'm unable to give a percentage for each one.

7. "Born-ins." Slaves at Camp Hero born of two other slaves. This class was considered the highest of the slave classes merely because of the fact that they very rarely remained at Camp Hero past the age of 10, nearly always being sold by then, as well as the fact that they had a fairly low turnover rate, as they were most often purpose-bred, and therefore kept alive just enough to fulfill their purposes.

8. "Drones." Adult slaves compelled to perform any number of tasks, though usually used as slave soldiers and occasionally breeders to make new slaves, as well as performing virtually all the menial labor on base. Most Drones had been at Camp Hero since childhood, and likely constituted the single largest demographic at Camp Hero.

9. "Supplies." Slaves newly brought in who were below the

age of majority- usually 10. As the name suggests, Supplies were seen as disposable, and had a very high turnover rate, particularly those who were put through the infamous "Montauk Chair," most of whom were never so much as recorded, as they died within moments of arrival. Over 90% of Supplies, however, were set to work various jobs on base, whilst undergoing training as supersoldiers and spies. The majority who survived for between two to six years went on to be sold elsewhere, but a significant amount was also kept on at Camp Hero to become Drones.

Some may have noticed that I've made no mention of species. This is deliberate, because all but the highest Officer class were made up of both humans (of all races) and various aliens, who all mixed and coexisted fairly cohesively within their own classes. Now, back to Kyle's narrative.

Kyle consulted the instruction papers he'd received. Listed before finding his desk was reporting to the armory for his on-base standard weapons. Kyle found it on sub-level three, after much consultation with the very poor maps he'd been issued.

The armory proved quite impressive, although the part Kyle had access to was quite small, merely a waiting room, separated from the armory itself by a gate and waist-high desk. The floor was concrete, and the proper armory itself was enormous. A warehouse, stretching as far as the eye could see, with shelves stacked with seemingly every kind of weapon imaginable. Kyle had stood staring at it in awe for several minutes before his thoughts were interrupted by a voice from behind the desk.

"You gonna gawk any longer? I might have to charge rent."

The voice belonged to a man of average height, with reddish-brown hair. He spoke with a brisk Long Island accent. He wore a navy blue jumpsuit, and even as he spoke, did not look up from the monitor on the desk.

Kyle approached. “I’m here to pick up my weapons. I’m Kyle Dellschau. I assume I’m in your system?”

“A newcomer eh? Clearly, or you’d know these aren’t weapon issuing hours. We closed 30 minutes ago. But since I’d hate for you to look like a fuckhead on your first day, I’ll make an exception, Mr. Dellschau,” the man said congenially.

Kyle was issued his weapons, namely an Ithaca Model 37 shotgun, an M-1911 Springfield pistol, and a KA-BAR combat knife. The pistol and knife fit into the holsters already present on Kyle’s fatigues, and the shotgun had a strap which allowed him to sling it over his back.

Since his job from Emmermann was, essentially, to make friends and study conditions, he struck up a conversation with this brash armory worker.

The worker, it turned out, had a name; Daniel O’Brien, or Danny, as he insisted on being called. Danny said he’d been brought to Camp Hero as a child, and that as Kyle would settle in, he’d quickly become used to seeing Danny’s face. However, beyond this, he seemed reticent to speak. Kyle would later discover that this was because Danny was, in fact, a slave, and while his and Kyle’s early interaction was friendly, he couldn’t have possibly trusted Kyle at this stage.

After again heavily consulting the map and taking multiple wrong turns, Kyle made his way to his desk, in what seemed to

be a wing of sorts, labeled “Securities.” It was a large office space, set up like an oversized typing pool. Kyle was relieved to find it to be sufficiently lit, which for some reason seemed to be a rare luxury in this peculiar place.

Uninstructed as to what to do next, Kyle found his white metal desk, lost in an ocean of ones just like it, marked as his only by the small gold nameplate placed neatly on the top. He seated himself in the uncomfortably small office chair he’d been provided, carefully setting his shotgun on the floor below the desk. Absent orders, Kyle decided to explore his immediate surroundings.

Through looking around, Kyle began to get a sense of the subtle ethnic segregation of Camp Hero. The employees who used the desks in his vicinity all had Germanic and northern European names. The office was quite vast, and he could see that the various ethnic groups represented in the “Securities” sector were each grouped separately, with their own sets of desks. With a shrug, Kyle turned his attention to the monitor on his desk.

The computer, it turned out, had an office interface, cheekily called the “Camp Hero Portal,” with an image of a rectangular stargate. Kyle chuckled at this. The computer, in a robotic but youthful female voice, next instructed him to hold his wrist containing his access nanites up to the screen. He did so. The screen went entirely blue, and the robotic voice continued to speak.

“Welcome, Mr. Dellschau. I am Irene. The personal assistant to all those at Camp Hero. If you have anything you need,

please let me know. I will now change the screen to your access page," the voice said.

"She's useless," a voice issued from one of the desks adjacent to Kyle's.

Kyle looked over at the tall brunette from which the voice had come. Her desk bore the name Frida Hofnitz.

"Oh?" Kyle replied.

"Yes. One of the higher-up's ideas. Thought it would boost morale or some such horseshit, having a virtual assistant. Except she doesn't assist. You're new, I can tell. If you actually need help, ask someone who actually does work here." Hofnitz said.

Kyle returned his attention to the screen. It was a fairly simple interface, consisting of only three file folders on a white screen. One was labeled "Operations," the second "Orders," and the final one read "Maps." The first two were blank, and the final only had maps of Camp Hero, though these were considerably more useful and complete than those Kyle had been issued, as they included the entirety of the above ground level, as well as 10 of the 11 sub-levels. The 11th was not mentioned on this map, as it was a secret that Kyle and most at Camp Hero would not learn the existence of for some time. Kyle navigated back to the home screen of the monitor, wondering if he'd missed something. Surely this couldn't be everything he was to know?

"Is this all? Three file folders, two of them empty?" Kyle asked Hofnitz.

"For now. You'll get more access as time goes on. They don't release info easily around here," Hofnitz replied.

Kyle had sat studying the maps for a time, committing them to photographic memory, when his computer began to emit a high pitched buzzing. However, nothing else changed. Kyle tried hitting a few buttons on the keyboard in vain.

“That means you’re up, Herr Dellschau. They don’t tell you that either. But it means to go to Spellman’s office, way down at the end of this room. He’s our commandant.” Hofnitz explained.

“Thank you,” Kyle replied, already beginning to wonder about this Hofnitz. Was she friend or foe?

Kyle looked around. At the far end of the vast sea of desks, set into the wall furthest from the door, was an office. Kyle walked to it. As on most of the offices, the silver plaque on the door simply bore the occupant’s surname, in this case, the “Spellman” whom Hofnitz had spoken of. Muttering some rather inflammatory things under his breath at the idea of being summoned by a Jew, Kyle opened the door and entered.

The desk inside, a rather extravagant mahogany piece, was occupied by a large man, with light olive skin and a long black beard with an even longer ponytail. He wore a black uniform of indeterminate origin. Kyle guessed it must be a Project Phoenix exclusive, as it didn’t appear in his database. Kyle stood ramrod straight before Spellman, determined to show German regimented spirit in the face of “Semitic control.” Either Kyle’s Nazi mindset from IBIS was intact, or Arasaka Robotics had reinstalled it in some way.

“You summoned me?” Kyle asked.

“Yes,” Spellman replied, in what Kyle guessed was a Carolina

accent, “I did. Says in your file that you can function as a translation unit. Do you speak Silesian?”

“Yes. I speak all the important languages of this sector.” was Kyle’s automatic reply, which had been programmed to always come out any time someone asked if he spoke any of the myriad languages or dialects that had been downloaded into him.

“Good. You’re to use it. You’re taking a group of Supplies to a primarily Silesian speaking colony. The location beyond that is classified. You’re after an artifact. Follow me to the briefing room.” With that, Spellman rose, selected a clipboard from his desk, and walked away from the office, with Kyle in tow.

Kyle and Spellman walked out of the vast “Securities” office space, and back into the tangle of poorly lit hallways. They eventually reached the “briefing room” that Spellman had spoken of. This room was also massive. Camp Hero, it seemed, did nothing by half measures, except lighting. The room was dark, lit by the hard light holograms that emanated from the numerous tables that were placed at intervals around the room. Kyle realized that mission briefs must be carried out here.

Before continuing to one of the tables, Spellman turned just next to the door, where a huge group of children was waiting. He read from his clipboard.

“Will Albert Allende, Andrew Flynn, Silas Krause, Isabel Muehlbauer, Mark Muehlbauer, and Sara Polanski please come with myself and Herr Dellschau here?” Spellman said.

From the treatment of the children he’d seen above ground, Kyle surmised that this was more of a demand on Spellman’s part than a polite request. Evidence for this was the fact that all

seven children who'd had their names called emerged from the many children seated on the floor all too suddenly, and summarily approached Kyle and Spellman.

As the seven of them walked, Kyle looked over them. They were apparently all between the ages of five and eleven, though one's age was clearly irrelevant here, from what he'd seen and heard from Sondra. From what Kyle could tell, these children were in a reasonable condition physically, which surprised him after the above ground scene, though one of them, a blonde girl whom he'd learn bore the name of Sara Polanski, was limping ever so slightly. Kyle kept a close eye on them all.

The group went to one of the holographic tables, where Spellman put on what looked like a set of headphones plugged into the side of it. Kyle learned that these served as a telepathic interface with the Montauk computer and file system, when the relevant images were immediately projected from the table, creating a hard light hologram, i.e., one that could be "touched" and moved and manipulated.

The briefing began. Rather than recounting it, I'll give an outline and explain the mission later. Kyle and five of the children, under the cover of being a family, were to go to a Silesian speaking Breakaway colony, location unknown, and steal an artifact from a museum. Mark Muehlbauer, to Kyle's surprise, was not to accompany the group on the operation itself. Rather, he was to "open the tunnel," a term Kyle did not yet understand. The remaining five children had been selected for being the only ones present at Camp Hero capable of speaking Silesian.

Before they left the base, the group, minus Mark, were outfitted and equipped. The trip to do this was another long trek, this time going to the fourth sub-level, which Spellman told Kyle was the "spy zone." It was easy to see why on arrival.

Sub-level four was far more sleek and sophisticated than those above, not to mention that it was sufficiently lit. The floors were tiled and smooth, and the halls spacious. Unlike the levels above, where most wore uniforms, the occupants of this level wore smart office clothes, and Kyle saw a few wearing clothes of other time periods, including one woman dressed in the garb of an a Southern Belle. The anachronism caught Kyle's eye, even though it seemed totally unremarkable to Spellman and the six children. Kyle was still only slowly piecing together the true nature of the happenings at this bizarre place, namely that it was a vast time travel program.

The group eventually reached a section of the level distinguished by a metal plaque that read "Outfitters." They entered one of the section's warehouse-sized rooms, this one lined up and down, as far as the eye could see, with rack after rack after rack of clothing, from seemingly every time period imaginable. Many of the clothes, Kyle couldn't imagine ever having been worn on Earth at any point. Perhaps they were for alien operatives, Kyle thought. He also began to register that Camp Hero was using "Basement Universe" tech. How else could they have achieved so many impossibly massive rooms?

The group had stood on the edge of the monstrous ocean of clothing articles for several minutes before they were approached by a tall black woman clad in a smart black ladies

business suit, with a wrist mounted computer on her left arm. She flipped open the computer as she approached the group.

"People to outfit, Jared?" she asked, addressing Spellman in what Kyle's system registered as a Haitian accent.

"Yes. Six, namely. Bound for an off-world colony. Contemporary times." Spellman explained. As he spoke, the Haitian woman was typing all this information into her wrist computer. She next looked up and examined the group.

"Haven't seen you before. Handsome devil, aren't you?" Angelique said sarcastically as Kyle caught her gaze.

"So they tell me," Kyle replied, in Haitian Creole. Then, extending his hand; "I'm Kyle Dellschau."

"Angelique Toussaint," the Haitian replied, not taking Kyle's outstretched hand. "You'll probably see me often, assuming you last. Don't get any ideas, however. My job is putting clothes on people, not taking mine off."

"I had no such ideas," Kyle replied. This was true. He hadn't.

"Yes, well, now that we're all getting along so well, can we please do what we came here to do?" Spellman said, bristling.

As a matter of formality, Angelique took the names of all the participants in the upcoming op, entering them into the wrist computer, then noting down the nature and location of the op. At the end, she called one of her assistants, a short Germanic woman whose name Kyle has since forgotten, to lead the group through the massive warehouse and find clothes appropriate for each assets. And so they went to and fro through the jungle of fabric, with the assistant consulting her own wrist computer to check each asset's measurements, eventually walking away

with bundles of the perfect clothes for the colony they were visiting. Passively fashionable, but not so much that they'd be noticed.

They were joined at the last minute by Hofnitz, the woman who had a desk next to Kyle's. It was as they were leaving the warehouse of clothing that she walked up to Kyle and the five children.

"Wait for me. I have to be outfitted too. Last minute thing." Hofnitz said, visibly annoyed.

"You're joining us? Why?" Kyle asked.

Hofnitz shrugged. "Spellman's orders. I think he wants me keeping an eye on you. Plus, you may need a medic. Not to mention, you are a newcomer. You don't even have a call sign yet." Hofnitz explained.

With that, Hofnitz vanished into the fabric ocean, returning only minutes later with her bundles of clothing, and the assurance that they'd receive luggage monetarily. Then, since Spellman had vanished, Hofnitz took the role of escorting Kyle and the five children to their next destination, this time to yet another section of the so-called "Espionage Sub-level," with the simple designation of "Outbound." Outside the door was a low lying bench, onto which Hofnitz laid her bundle of clothes, and instructed Kyle and the others to do the same, stating that they'd find their clothes packed when they returned.

Over the course of all this, Kyle noticed something that disturbed him; the children were silent. From the moment they'd been called out of the crowd, and all through the long marches and the outfitting, none of them said a word. Kyle was

no expert on children, having never truly been one, and having no memories of his IBIS life, but he knew that this silence wasn't natural.

The group then proceeded into the sector, finding another hall of doors. One day here, and Kyle was already growing very tired of the scenery. The seven first entered a room reading "Documentation." It looked like a typical office suite, with cream walls and a carpeted floor. Hofnitz approached the rather harried looking young receptionist man behind the desk and spoke.

"We need our documents. Contemporary German colonial." Hofnitz ordered.

The young man nodded, then proceeded to take everyone's names before disappearing into the office, returning a few minutes later with a small packet, which Hofnitz opened, pulling out a set of seven passports for the colonies.

Kyle examined his. At first, he was confused. Had the bureaucratic machine of Camp Hero really churned out this document so fast? He understood it for Hofnitz and the children- they'd been here for some time. But for himself, it seemed odd that this had been minted so quickly. But then, perhaps Emmermann had ordered it, or even sent it himself.

Kyle was also both relieved and a little bit disconcerted to see his name on an official document like this. It was his first encounter, concretely, with the interstellar nation of "Der Bund Freier Deutschen Welten," or the Axis German civilization in space. Kyle's database had some very brief historical information on them, but he'd never had an official encounter until this

moment. Kyle was relieved to see that it recorded him as "Species: Human," and then "Race: Aryan."

The passport itself was black, with gold gothic lettering, and a gold Sonnenrad in the center. Otherwise, it was fairly standard, with a picture inside, some very basic information, and several pages for stamps. The children's passports all had Germanic names, which have since been forgotten to history, while Kyle and Hofnitz were able to keep their names.

Kyle wondered how he'd maintain the cover that they were all his own children, given their differing surnames, then supposed, with a chuckle, that the "I've been with a lot of women" excuse would suffice.

This step taken, Kyle, Hofnitz, and the children proceeded out, only stopping back at the bench to pick up their luggage, which had been packed for them, as Hofnitz had promised- another illustration of the extremely well oiled machine that was Camp Hero.

The final step was a trip to the armory, where Kyle noted that Danny asked for the time period of the weapons, to which Hofnitz again replied "contemporary colonial," then added "concealed." Kyle and Hofnitz were promptly issued with tiny, rather flat plasma pistols that were easily concealable in their clothes.

The seven finally marched to an elevator and descended a good distance- all the way down to sub-level 10. They emerged from the elevator onto a catwalk, overlooking a massive concrete room. On the floor of this room, placed at odd intervals, were perhaps 10 portals. They were all of the ring variety, and

only big enough for a few people to walk through, and the portals inside them were royal blue.

The centerpiece of the room, however, was one massive portal. It was rectangular, unlike the round ones around it, and enormous, standing at least 40 feet tall by 30 feet wide. Situated on the floor near it was what looked roughly like a dentist's chair, laid back, with a large mirror situated on the floor near the foot of the chair, allowing the occupant to see the portal at their head. The headrest of the chair was covered by a helmet-like visor of white plastic. From the bottom of the chair, a tangle of wires came out, connecting the chair to the giant portal. Kyle recognized the chair's current occupant as young Mark Muehlbauer.

Under the lead of Hofnitz, the seven approached the giant portal frame. Hofnitz tapped Mark on the leg, and wordlessly, the portal began booting up. The mammoth frame was first filled with a solid, deep blue light, which gradually began to become hollow, forming a tunnel of blue light with holes in its ceiling and walls. At the end of the tunnel, one could just make out the destination. Kyle squinted. It looked like a forested area. At this point, Hofnitz began to instruct, for Kyle's benefit.

"Right, now we proceed through the tunnel single file. The transit is almost instant. Keep your eyes exclusively on the destination. Don't look up, down, or sideways at any of the holes. If you do, you may step through them, and you'll be lost at some random point in space and time, and we'll have to track you down. Make it your motto, Herr Dellschau; eyes fucking forward! Okay, now let's move out!" Hofnitz barked.

And so, Kyle, Hofnitz, and the five children they were escorting went through the portal. Kyle followed Hofnitz's instructions, exiting the tunnel in just a few strides. They stepped onto a forested area. Kyle looked behind him. The portal was still obvious, gaping open, about a foot off the ground, though the frame didn't exist on this side. Rather than the tunel seen from the other side, however, the portal room at Camp Hero looked immediate. If one stepped through from this side, one would instantly be back at Camp Hero, or so it looked.

Once all five children went through the portal, the group proceeded forward, with Hofnitz leading the way, as she seemed the only one who knew where to go. As they walked, Kyle began investivating the surroundings. They were in dense forests. The trees looked similar to cedars, at least in general shape. However, what was rather striking was that the foliage was a dark turquoise, and the bark was almost black. They saw no wildlife, save for some glimpses of large gray birds. Or were they small pterosaurs? Their heads were more lizardlike than birdlike.

The sun was a red dwarf, Kyle guessed. The sky was a brilliant shade of crimson. He wasn't aware of any issues until he heard coughing, and turned to see one of the children, the oldest one, a girl of perhaps 11, doubled over and being assisted by two of the boys. Then it struck him that he didn't know who any of them were. He'd only heard their names, not learned which one was which.

He began to do a process of elimination. The youngest boy was visibly of Latin stock, so he was most likely to be Albert Allende. He next examined the two boys assisting the ailing

girl. One of them was tall and blonde, and appeared somewhat stronger than the rest. Andrew Flynn, he guessed, as the boy did look like the son of Jack Flynn, whom he'd met the night before. This meant that the other boy, brown haired and also assisting the girl, must be Silas Krause. The identities of the two girls, however, were still unknown.

But then, at the sight of them, Kyle felt something. Something he hadn't felt before. Love, perhaps? Certainly, an urge to protect and help these children, and a newfound level of disgust at the treatment he'd witnessed so far. He got on one knee, and spoke to the girl.

"Are you struggling with the air?" Kyle asked. The girl nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Sara," she said as she coughed. "Sara Polanski. I'll be fine." She started to rise, then immediately collapsed again.

"Sir, are you not struggling with the air? The rest of us all are." the blonde haired boy said, in a painfully beseeching tone.

"Andrew, is it?" Kyle asked.

The boy nodded.

Kyle smiled. "I know your dad. Call me Kyle. But to answer your question, I don't breathe."

"Hey! What's the hold up? We've got a schedule to keep!" Hofnitz cried, calling to them from much further up the trail.

Kyle then remembered the reason Hofnitz had been sent along in the first place.

"Hey. One of the girls needs a medic. She can't handle the air," Kyle called back.

“Little shit. Probably faking it. Look, we’ll be in a pressurized vehicle soon enough. We’ve gotta move.” Hofnitz shouted back impatiently. So much for Spellman sending her as a medic.

“Can the rest of you walk?” Kyle asked, turning back to the children.

“We can. She can’t. But we’ll continue helping her,” Andrew Flynn said.

“No need,” Kyle said. Kyle picked up and began carrying Sara, who was becoming visibly sick. He held her face close to his leather jacket, and walked forward with the children.

They eventually reached a narrow, poorly paved road splitting the forest. On it was a rather odd, boxy, and massive vehicle, roughly resembling a large Humvee, though it was sleek and black, and had handy steps up into the cab and passenger seats.

“Right. I’m driving. I know this colony.” Hofnitz decided, already climbing into the driver’s seat.

Kyle entered the back of the vehicle with the children. He discovered that the passenger seating was more like a limousine, made up of benches rather than seats, constructed so that the center of the vehicle was left open.

Kyle laid the sick Sara on one of the benches, then seated himself on one. He was realizing something. For one, these children had no advocates. And for another, they would, he sensed, be the center of the “regime change” that was on the horizon. Kyle was determined to become their friend. This was partly out of self-interest of course, however, it was the beginning of a lifelong trend of compassion for and defense of

children.

As the car began to drive, Kyle thought of making conversation. He examined his database for a way to start. Unfortunately, while Kyle's brain had been installed with virtually every language in the history of the solar system, there was no corresponding program to tell him how to use them. He was expected to be instinctual. While this had worked fine so far, he'd not yet had to attempt to relate to and be conversational with children.

"So. What are all your goals and ambitions in life?" Kyle asked the children. It seemed a reasonable place to start. A slight chuckle went up among them.

"To not be a sla-" little Albert Allende began, before being slapped upside the head by Isabel.

They then proceeded to give less controversial aspirations. Albert wanted to be a fighter pilot on his favorite planet. Isabel said she wished to be a midwife in the surrogate labs, a concept Kyle was then unfamiliar with. Silas, speaking for the first time, said he wished to be a Martian gunrunner, which the others chuckled at. Andrew stated that his position was guaranteed, and that he was, upon eventually leaving Camp Hero, to become a soldier on Mars, defending it from American incursion. Then finally Sara Polanski, who'd seemingly regained a tiny bit of strength due to being in the pressurized vehicle, said she wished to be a touring colonial singer, with a band and her own tour ship.

All except Andrew (likely due to his slightly more privileged position than the others, being of the Creole class) seemed to

have a somewhat resigned air about them that they'd never actually achieve these goals, an attitude which confused Kyle at the time, as he was still so uninitiated into Camp Hero culture, and the high turnover rate of its children.

The vehicle drove on for nearly an hour before reaching a checkpoint. Only then did Kyle look up. He saw that the checkpoint was on the edge of land, and beyond it was water. The road they were on continued on a narrow bridge out to an island. The island had a large city on it, and beach houses around the shore. Kyle expected this to be their ultimate destination.

As they pulled up to the checkpoint, Hofnitz turned in her seat and spoke to all those present. "Remember. Speak only Silesian and/or German. Not a word of English. Don't get us killed."

They pulled in at the checkpoint. It was quite small, just a concrete, single person booth. A blue force field served as the gate between checkpoint and bridge. Hofnitz rolled down her window and had an exchange with the guard in the booth.

Guard: "Afternoon ma'am. Out for a drive?"

Hofnitz: "Yes. I have my brother and his children with me."

Guard: "Right. I'll need to see everyone's documents."

Kyle handed her all the passports, and the guard began to look through them.

Hofnitz: "Tight security."

The booth guard shrugged.

Guard: "Damn commies protesting the Martian war. What can I say? Should take them back to Earth and show them why

the war is necessary."

Hofnitz: "Yes, quite."

Guard: "Well, all these documents check out. One odd thing; these children all have different surnames. How are they your brother's kids?"

Hofnitz rolled her eyes. "My brother isn't exactly discreet with the opposite sex. Not the brightest man I've ever known."

Kyle chuckled at this.

Guard: "I see. Well, don't begrudge the man too much. As you were."

With this, the guard handed the passports back, then hit a button which switched off the force field, and the group drove on.

The colony proved fairly nondescript, made of high rise buildings and with a vaguely cyberpunk aesthetic.

Hofnitz pulled up to a two-story wooden house on the opposite side of the island from where they had entered, on the beach near some woods. Hofnitz explained that this was a safe house. They unloaded into the house, which had an old-fashioned European layout and cream walls. After showing Silas, Albert, Isabel, and Andrew up to their rooms, Kyle put his foot down and insisted that Hofnitz examine Sara Polanski, who wasn't noticeably improving. He then went up to his own room.

Kyle decided to search for any clues that might tell him the name of this colony. He was coming up empty, when the door to his room opened and Hofnitz stepped in.

"Well. Strangely enough, the girl is actually sick. She's having difficulty with the air. Needs medication. Which means I

have to go into town and get them. This safe house was also not restocked with food after whoever used it last left, so I have to get groceries too. You're to stay here and watch the little shits," Hofnitz stated. And that, apparently, was that.

Kyle accompanied her to the front door. Just before leaving, Hofnitz turned and spoke again.

Hofnitz: "They're not children, you know."

Kyle: "Excuse me? I know of the re-aging that's apparently a constant in this peculiar and inhumane program. But they're still in children's bodies."

Hofnitz: "Yes. You see? This is the manipulation they do, Herr Dellschau. They want pity and favors just because they're in a lower position than some. Don't let them get to you. See you later."

With that, Hofnitz left.

Kyle occupied himself around the house, getting the children settled, then trying again to find anything colony specific which might tell him where they were. He found none, but he did find an old Monopoly set, and he and the others played it until Hofnitz returned.

Hofnitz returned a good three hours after leaving, mumbling something about having to go to multiple stores. She administered whatever medication she'd acquired to Sara, who seemed to perk up somewhat. The seven then settled into a dinner of sausage sandwiches and a store bought sponge cake, before finally settling into their beds.

Kyle was awoken in the middle of the night by a nudging on his right shoulder. He immediately sat up and switched on the

lamp by his bedside. He was expecting, in his mindset, to find Hofnitz seeking an assignation. Instead, he found Albert and Andrew standing in their pajamas.

“Hello boys. You need something?” Then, a terrible thought occurred to him. “Boys. If you’re here to… offer yourselves, I’m not that type of guard. Is that common? If so, please point out who is doing it and I’ll-“ Kyle began.

“No,” Andrew cut in. “Pleas keep your voice down. We’re here to provide information for you.”

“Information?” Kyle asked.

“Yes. We know you’re here spying on the program. You don’t fit in, and Andrew’s dad told us where you’re from. We want to help. The others are sound asleep, we won’t be disturbed.” Albert explained.

Kyle nodded. “Alright boys. Let’s hear it.” And ‘hear it’ he did.

Albert and Andrew spent a solid two hours giving him intel. They told him partially of the abuses at Camp Hero. The public floggings for many infractions. The rumors of sexual favors from the children sought by Nicholas and the others of the Officer class. The mysterious group known as “The Few,” who were the tiny group of individuals who could operate the chair that opened the portals to most of the locations that the various missions occurred in. They never spoke directly of, though they did hint at the incredibly high turnover rate, with Albert once remarking about “the likelihood of Kyle not seeing him again.” Only when the sun began to rise did they go padding back to their beds.

The next morning, all seven once again piled into the pecu-

liar vehicle, and Hofnitz drove them to their target, which was a museum composed of a series of white, undulating domes. Kyle noticed a sign as they drove into the parking lot; “Neue Breslau Colonial Historical Museum.” So, the colony was Neue Breslau. Kyle logged this away as they parked and began to scout the museum, noting all the security features and sharing them telepathically.

They were uniformly shocked to find the museum quite insecure, with not even any external cameras. This was going to be an easy heist.

They moved inside next, finding the artifact they were after, a metal pyramid about eight inches tall, with several holes in it revealing a white crystal sphere inside. The display listed it as a relic of the “First Solar Empire.”

The inside of the museum, a fairly standard (albeit futuristic) one, was also quite insecure, with only a few cameras and easily pickable locks.

Their reconnaissance done, the seven returned to the safe house, awaiting nightfall. This proved a long wait, as the planet Neue Breslau was on had 50 hour days. At night, they returned. The heist was about as basic as they’d anticipated. They simply picked the front door’s lock, entered the security booth near the door, switched off the cameras, and took the artifact. Rather than waiting for their theft to be discovered, they returned to Camp Hero immediately, passing the checkpoint with the excuse of a “family emergency in an outlying town.”

The portal was still open, or had been reopened. Kyle reported back to his desk, and the children were escorted back

to wherever it was they were housed. Spellman went to the secretarial offices to dictate the mission report.

Something on the wall of the office caught Kyle's attention. The calendar, which read the first of May. The same day he'd left. Confused, he turned to the man at the desk next to his, who bore the surname of Müller.

Kyle: "Excuse me, did you see me leave?"

Muller: "Yes?"

Kyle: "How long ago was that?"

Müller glanced at his watch. "About two hours ago."

Kyle: "That's impossible! I just spent two days on a planet with 50 hour days!"

Müller chuckled. "Time dilation, Herr Dellschau. You get used to it eventually."

The next fortnight or so passed in this way. Kyle was being "seasoned," and so the missions he was sent on were of a nature he'd be used to. Always off-planet, always in contemporary time, and always quite brief. It would be redundant for me to recount it all. Kyle was not, during this "seasoning period," sent on missions lasting years or decades, though he became used to hearing whispers of them.

One thing Kyle did like was a considerable openness surrounding sex. Kyle found that most of the German women, especially, were quite willing to steal away to a closet or storage room in their free time, particularly once they learned he couldn't pass diseases or get them pregnant, so he was quite satisfied in that arena.

Kyle also started to feel rather like a cog in a machine, a

machine which was very obviously breaking, even without the "regime change" prophecy.

All this sex and emotionality put Kyle into quite a poetic and musical mood. One day, he went to the storehouse of musical instruments, next to the recording studio, and was instantly taken by what he determined must be his instrument. A red acoustic Gibson Guitar, which he dubbed Lola.

During Kyle's off-time at his desk, or in his bunk, he began writing his first of what would become countless songs he'd write at Camp Hero, and in all of Project Phoenix. Then, remembering the policy, he reluctantly went to the recording studio one evening and recorded the following lyrics.

Take me down to the river bend
Take me down to the fighting end
Wash the poison from off my skin
Show me how to be whole again

Fly me up on a silver wing
Past the black where the sirens sing
Warm me up in the nova's glow
And drop me down to the dream below

'Cause I'm only a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything else for you to see
For you to see

Bring me home in a blinding dream
Through the secrets that I have seen
Wash the sorrow from off my skin
And show me how to be whole again

‘Cause I’m only a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything there for you to see
For you to see

‘Cause I’m only a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything else I need to be

‘Cause I’m only a crack in this castle of glass
Hardly anything there for you to see
For you to see
For you to see

*Author’s note. A long and important chapter, which will be worth retaining going forward.**

Chapter 8

It was not long before things for Kyle began to change again, particularly, the nature of his missions. It began about two weeks after his arrival on Walpurgisnacht 1984, when he received a notice on his computer that he was expected in Nicholas's office. He begrudgingly answered, walking the long distance to the administrative offices. Kyle entered without knocking, just to be rude. Kyle had decided that just because he couldn't disobey orders, he didn't have to be polite about following them.

"Tin Man! About time you showed up!" Nicholas exclaimed.

"I could hardly have come any faster," Kyle replied evenly.

"Indeed? Well, coulda fooled me. In any event, Emmermann is continuing his bid to become master of the fucking universe. He wants you on a certain mission. I'm allowing it on one condition; the fact that you'll have a vested interest." Nicholas said.

"And why should that be?" Kyle asked.

"Because if this mission is unsuccessful, you don't exist." Nicholas said dismissively.

And on that cryptic note, Nicholas handed Kyle a glass pad, much like the one Dr. Tarakada had used. He didn't say "fuck off," but he might as well have. So Kyle left.

Upon returning to his desk, Kyle examined the glass pad, discovering that it switched on with a single look. Just seconds later, an image came over the screen. A young and handsome Japanese man, with a rather impatient look on his face. This changed to a look of outright annoyance when he saw Kyle.

“You don’t look like Ms. Mittelbraun, and you’re definitely not in a private spot,” the Japanese man said with a sigh. “Is this Nicky Boy’s fault?”

Kyle chuckled. “I believe so.”

“Well. Get the other mission members. Gather them up and into a briefing room. Then have Ms. Mittelbraun reconnect. Fucking unbelievable.” said the Japanese man.

“Sir, I don’t know the identities of the other mission members,” Kyle said.

“When I disconnect, check the tablet. It’s locked biometrically according to placement on the mission team. Most of it will be locked from you, since you’re not Ms. Mittelbraun, but it should still show a members list. Over and out,” the Japanese man said decisively.

“He sounded pissed,” a man at a desk near to Kyle’s observed.

“Very helpful. Thank you so much,” Kyle replied sarcastically, standing to find somewhere private. He instinctively knew it was to be kept secret.

Kyle eventually managed to find an unoccupied and out of the way maintenance closet, and once again began attempting to work the glass pad, only for it to instantly start working once it was flipped, which caused him momentary embarrassment,

then annoyance at the fact that the device was identical, both front and back, and had no indicators of which way it wished to be held.

The screen had several applications which contained mission related information. Participants, locations, plans of operations, contacts, and so on. Most of it was redacted for Kyle. The glass pad was apparently able to detect who was reading it. However, Kyle was able to see that the op would involve time in both Manila and Okinawa, and that it was likely to last for years.

"So," Kyle realized, "it's true. They do send people on missions of multiple years' length. And now I guess I ought to be getting my systems used to such an idea."

Though if he was being honest with himself, Kyle was looking forward to a long break from this world of slaves and secrecy.

As the disgruntled Japanese gent had said, the participants file opened. They were as follows:

Anya Mittelbraun (Team Leader)

Jack Flynn (Infantry)

Yoshiro Tsurabaya (Cultural Relations)

Norma Jean Pearce (Cryptography)

Brian Foster (Technicals)

Kyle Dellschau (Defenses and Translations)

Andrew Flynn (Trainee: Defenses)

So, Kyle realized, young Andrew was his trainee now. He didn't mind. He had a growing fondness for the boy, by now having escorted him on several missions. And Kyle also looked

forward to getting to know better these people he'd met on his first night, particularly Jack, as Kyle had fallen through on his promise that he'd "stick with" Jack. And so, he got up to track down the other team members, in the order in which they were listed.

Kyle checked his computer; by now, he'd been given a real-time directory of Camp Hero employees, at least those of rank and import, and those of significance to his mission. Kyle found the various team members, committing their locations to photographic memory.

Anya, the directory said, was to be found teaching a class above ground, on "Stanford's Green," the name for a training ground made up of a fenced in park-like area of lawn and trees, (about three square miles, or 4.8 km in size) littered all throughout with exercise equipment and gun ranges.

Kyle trekked there, using the entrance set for him. An important note; this was not the same entrance described earlier. Kyle, under strict orders, used an entrance near the Montauk Point Lighthouse, in the woods. There, one found what appeared to be an innocuous metal shack, though it had one of the locks common to Camp Hero which was opened by scanning the nanites in the wrists of assets. Inside the shack, one found a trapdoor with a ladder. A descent of this ladder would find one in a small room with a cage elevator, also locked behind a nanite scan, from which one could access the levels one through ten.

Most of the rest of the people in the "Securities" division also used this entrance, though Kyle suspected it had been

assigned to him, at least partly, in order to prevent him from seeing any more "supply runs." This entrance was also a very long trek from the German single men's barracks in Battery 216, where he resided. Even though Kyle, as a synthetic, had unlimited stamina, he was still often heard to "bitch and moan" about the distance, and many who knew him in those days still recall him doing this.

Kyle found his way to "Stanford's Green" in short order, though he had to take the long way to avoid the "White House," the local name for the white cottage near the radar tower. This house was lived in by a man with the surname of Bielek, and Kyle, for reasons unknown to him at the time, was ordered to avoid this man, and all things associated with him. Kyle would not understand the reasoning behind this for many years. However, he didn't object. Bielek was of the higher Officer Class, which Kyle was finding to be a uniformly loathsome group of people.

Kyle reached "Stanford's Green," and then, after asking a few of the individuals training there, found Anya. She wore full SS regalia, and was standing in a clearing, training a group of perhaps 30 children, all girls of about 11 years old in street clothes. Slave girls, Kyle thought to himself, with a slight shiver.

Anya herself stood in the center, next to a stone block about the size of a refrigerator. The girls were positioned away from her, watching and listening as Anya gave the class. After listening a moment, Kyle realized it was a telekinesis class. Anya was attempting, with no success, to get the girls to pool their psionic energy and lift the block.

“Can I do that?” Kyle suddenly wondered.

Kyle’s system answered; yes, telekinesis was among his capabilities. He closed his eyes, and began to imagine the stone block levitating. Then, catching himself daydreaming, Kyle opened his eyes, finding to his shock that it had worked; the block was levitating a good 12 feet off the ground, and Anya and the girls were staring back at him. With a start, Kyle unceremoniously dropped the block and began walking towards Anya.

Anya recovered herself.

“Something you need, Herr Dellschau?” She asked. Then, with a chuckle; “You are a dark horse, aren’t you?”

“Looked like you all needed a demonstration!” Kyle replied. “But I’m afraid this isn’t a social visit.” He produced the glass pad and handed it to Anya.

Kyle turned to the girls.

“You ladies mind if I borrow Frau Mittelbraun for a bit?” Kyle asked.

A giggle went through the girls, which Kyle didn’t understand the meaning of, before Kyle briefly explained the situation as Anya quickly looked over the glass pad’s files and then spoke again.

“Well. This looks urgent. Right, I’ll set up the briefing room, you get everyone else together.” She turned to the trainees. “Ladies, back to your barracks and await further instructions. I have business to attend to.” Anya said tiredly.

Anya then turned and strode away, muttering under her breath about “fucking Nicky Boy,” which, Kyle was now realiz-

ing with amusement, must be the common slur for Nicholas.

"Wait!" Kyle called out as she walked away. "What about Tsurabaya? I don't know where to find him."

"Oh, he's the one we're to call. He's already on site," Anya replied.

Kyle then turned and set out to find the others. At one of the gun ranges on "Stanford's Green," Jack Flynn expressed surprise at seeing Kyle again, almost seeming puzzled that Kyle was still alive and hadn't sought him out.

Norma Jean Pearce he found in her office on the sixth sub-level. This was the academic district, where time travel was studied via texts of history, combing for changes, as well as sending their workers on operations to study changes to history firsthand. Kyle had not visited this level before, though he'd heard that positions here were heavily sought after by the slaves, as treatment of assets was comparatively humane. Norma Jean grumbled about leaving her desk, but understood the urgency.

Kyle located Brian Foster in the armory with a girl he hadn't seen before, attempting to repair a large rail gun. Both Brian and the girl cursed a good deal about having to leave, with Brian promising to return after he'd completed the briefing.

Andrew Flynn, last on the list, Kyle found back at the barracks, reading a book. A shocking privilege, when compared to most of the Camp Hero children. With all team members gathered, they made their way to the briefing room. All this, of course, took place over far more time than it takes to recount. I avoid excruciating detail that would only serve as "filler."

The large group finally found their way to the room with the mass of holographic briefing tables that Anya had already set up, placing the glass pad on a stand of sorts. She was already engaged in rapt conversation with the Japanese man from before. He must be the mythical Tsurabaya, Kyle surmised.

Norma Jean turned to Kyle as they approached.

“Looks like you’ve made the rest of us late, Newcomer,” Norma Jean said, with a wink that stymied Kyle.

Granted, it was only their second meeting, but Norma Jean still hadn’t broken the perception Kyle had of her as being the most mysterious creature he had ever met. Kyle wondered whether this made Norma Jean more or less attractive to him, and she likely knew it.

The meeting commenced, with holographic images popping up on the table as they became relevant. This happened automatically, as the tables had a telepathic interface. As usual, I will not be describing the briefing itself in detail. However, the assembled team was being sent on a years-long assignment into 1936 Okinawa, with an eventual foray into Manila, seeking certain ancient technologies which would, if found and used correctly, lead to the existence of Arasaka Robotics, and therefore allow Kyle to come to exist. Kyle was quickly learning not to question such non-linear time and the associated paradoxes, and for the reader’s own sanity, it’s likely best that they do the same.

The briefing took several hours, with the promise of leaving in three days. Kyle decided, with Jack’s permission, to begin his training of young Andrew now, before they left. Kyle mentally

examined the maps he had absorbed, finding the various training grounds around Camp Hero and their purposes. He settled on the one on the sixth sub-level labeled “Paramilitary.”

“Go, I grant you permission.” Anya’s voice, cutting into Kyle’s thoughts.

“Excuse me? Reading my thoughts?” Kyle asked.

“No private thoughts around here, Newcomer.” Norma Jean interjected. “And don’t you forget it.”

“Would any of you kindly explain what the fuck you’re talking about?” Jack Flynn asked with a chuckle.

Kyle turned and spoke; “Yes. I wish to take your son for training. The mission brief says he’s to shadow me and learn my job. I wish to start now. The lady here was reading my thoughts.”

“Well, she gave permission. Suppose I can’t stop you,” Jack replied.

“Do I get a say?” Andrew demanded, causing the adults to laugh.

Kyle stepped forward

“Come now, my boy. We need to get you suited up and started,” Kyle said.

And so Kyle led young Andrew away, with Anya promising she’d authorize the changes inevitable in both Kyle’s and Andrew’s schedules.

They went on their long trek back to the barracks to allow Andrew to change into appropriate gear for training. As Andrew was doing so, Kyle noticed something- massive, mostly straight scars on the boy’s back.

“Kid, where did you get those awful scars? Were you attacked by a creature?” Kyle asked.

“Oh, these? Public floggings. They do those around here,” Andrew replied simply.

Kyle then felt a tightness in his chest. It didn’t restrict his breathing- Kyle had no respiratory system. It was a phantom tightness as his metaphorical heart broke. Kyle dropped to a squatting position and took young Andrew into his arms.

“I’m so sorry,” were the only words Kyle could manage.

Andrew pulled away and shrugged. “Just how it is right now, isn’t it? But it won’t be forever. And besides, they only dared do it to me once. My dad killed the flogger. And he’d keep it up, if they kept trying it. I’m lucky. Most of the kids here don’t have that protection.”

Kyle decided then and there that he wouldn’t continue to passively observe and wait for the “regime change” promised by Emmermann. He was determined to partake in it now. His orders hadn’t said he couldn’t do so.

Once Andrew was changed, he and Kyle went to the armory for their weapons. The desk was now staffed by a perky young redhead woman, the same Kyle had seen repairing a rail gun with Brian.

“Where’s Danny?” Kyle asked.

“Danny’s job changed. Happens a lot around here. I’m Marjorie. How can I assist you gents?” The redhead replied.

“We need weapons. Axis issue, 1936-1945,” Kyle replied.

“I think I can help you there.”

Marjorie returned a few minutes later carrying a duffle bag

with the requisite weapons, as well as a veritable packet of papers for Kyle to fill out, checking them out of the armory. They then processed on their way to the sixth sub-level, and to the training ground labeled “Paramilitary.”

On their journey, they ran into the missing Danny, who was now clad in office clothes.

“Moved you along, have they?” Kyle asked.

“Yeah. They have me in analytics now. They’ll send me off again once they realize I don’t know shit about it. Here’s hoping they transfer me out of Camp Hero entirely this time.” Danny explained.

“So,” Kyle said, “if you were to, say, fail to show up to your job entirely, that’d incense them more? Increase likelihood of you being sent off?”

“I bet it fuckin’ would,” Danny answered. “What are you implying?”

“I’m training the boy today,” Kyle stated, gesturing at Andrew; “I need a third person. Come along. I can see you want this transfer.”

Danny chuckled. “Good job Kyle. You’re learning.”

“Learning what?” Kyle asked

“To game the system. Only way to live in this fuckin’ hole. And you’re leading and adapting to it to.” Danny said. With a grin, he added; “Pretty quickly too, by the standards of most of the Krauts who come through here.”

Kyle smiled. “Racial epithets aside, thank you. Now, let’s get on with this. The day is still young!”

Privately, Kyle had no thoughts at the time of gaming any

systems. Only of helping his friend. However, Danny's words registered, and Kyle assimilated them, adding them to his brain and database of things to emulate and observe.

They soon arrived at the intended level and training area. It proved to be all that Kyle could have needed and more, being quite vast, containing not only many shooting galleries, but also a number of warehouse sized rooms complete with artificial recreations of various environments with adjustable gravity, and even a huge swimming pool in which one could train in underwater combat.

It was in this environment that Kyle and Andrew spent the next three days, leaving only to return to their barracks. They ate their meals at the canteen for those who worked in the training area. They'd always catch Danny in the hallways and bring him along, which they were never stopped from doing. Either the machine of work at Camp Hero didn't care, or someone knew this was happening and allowed it.

Kyle looks back on those three days very fondly. He became close with both Danny and Andrew. In Andrew, he discovered a shared taste in guns. In Danny, he discovered a shared taste in women. Kyle trained Andrew in as many aspects of the art of bodyguarding as he could, teaching him how to scan rooms, how to guard another without excessively endangering himself, how to spot a threat, etcetera. They particularly trained in the warehouse sized room made to look like a shantytown, as well as the underwater combat training pool, as these seemed the most appropriate to Okinawa and whatever they might meet there. Danny was used as the "test dummy" of a person to

guard.

One notable incident did occur on the second day. It was as the trio was in one of the lanes of a shooting gallery. Danny had picked up one of the guns the trio was using, a pistol custom made for this operation. It was designed to look like a Japanese WWII Nambu pistol, however, it was in fact modified to fire high-velocity 9mm ammunition. Danny was admiring it, and, unaware that it was loaded, pulled the trigger absentmindedly. The bullet ripped through the air, lodging itself deep in Kyle's shoulder. Kyle clutched his shoulder in pain and collapsed against the metal wall of the shooting gallery.

"Agh! Fuck! Quit fingering that goddamn thing Danny! It's a weapon, not a fucking pussy!" Kyle screamed. He then caught Andrew's eye.

"Sorry," Kyle quickly added sheepishly.

A silence fell over the three, which lasted perhaps five seconds. Andrew came to his senses and ran down the shooting gallery, shouting, "We need a medic!" Meanwhile, Danny approached and began looking over the wound.

"You're not bleeding much. I guess that's a good sign," Danny said.

Kyle did something then that he never had before; he accessed his own schematics and began to assess.

"It's not real blood. It's an Arasaka product. They call it "Blood-2." Mass-produced nanite and chemical mix that serves many of the same functions as blood, and passes for it, until subjected to a lab test. My body will make more of it, don't worry. I'm designed to be fully self replenishing unless a major

part is damaged."

"Fascinating. Why are we talking about this?" Danny asked.

"Well for one thing, it distracts from the pain where you shot me, asshole!" Kyle replied good-naturedly. "But also, it's my first time examining my systems. I believe synthetics like myself tend not to do such things. We don't like reminders that we aren't organic."

"Shit. I wouldn't have thought you could feel pain," Danny said, a thoughtful expression creeping over his face.

Soon enough, two medics arrived, one a short brunette girl, the other a tall black man. They brought with them a stretcher which hovered, as it was placed on a small antigravity plate. Kyle hoisted himself up and onto the stretcher.

The female medic carried a glass pad. After a few taps of the screen, she began to speak. "What's the nature of the injury?" she asked.

"I was shot in the shoulder. Hurts like hell, but my systems aren't registering any damage," Kyle grunted.

"Your systems? Are you a toaster?" the medic asked, contempt growing in her voice.

"Excuse me? What did you just fucking call me?" Kyle demanded, raising himself from the hovering stretcher.

The black male medic (perhaps more correctly called an "orderly") pulled a cattle prod from the underside of the stretcher.

"Watch your mouth, Tin Man. You don't want me using this. Lay your metal ass back down and I won't." the orderly threatened.

Kyle couldn't forget the terrible sensations brought by the cattle prods at the Arasaka plant. He wasn't eager to endure that again. Begrudgingly, he obeyed and laid back on the stretcher. Kyle tried not to notice that neither Danny nor Andrew spoke up for or defended him.

The orderlies "took their sweet time" in bringing the stretcher above ground, exiting through the radar tower which Kyle had entered the underground of on his first day. By taking this route, Kyle got a particularly good look at the area where the "supply runs" were dropped off. The elevator opened in a hallway, at the end of which was a massive concrete room. The floors of this room were wet. Kyle noted a white fire hose on one wall. The floor slanted, ever so slightly, towards a large drain in the middle.

On a far wall was a set of benches. Above these, in blue paint on a huge whitewashed board, was a notice; "Leave all clothes here. New clothes will be issued momentarily. Failure to leave any and all articles of clothing will result in punishment, no exceptions." A series of much smaller, mostly metal signs bore this same notice in languages Kyle registered as German, French, Spanish, traditional Chinese characters, Vietnamese, and to Kyle's considerable surprise, even a script that his software registered as indigenous human Martian in its origin.

The stretcher left the building through a narrow staircase, out a door which Kyle recognized upon exiting as the door through which he'd seen the children of the "supply run" being funneled. He was able to put the scene together then. These children, brought from all over in obviously deplorable condi-

tions, were sent down these stairs into the huge concrete room and stripped, then hosed down, then reclothed, presumably in the striped pajamas which Kyle had known some he'd worked with to wear. A thought struck him then; where were they housed? In what conditions? Up till that point, Kyle hadn't seen any place. All the barracks he walked past to and from work seemed to house mostly adults. Not the many children he'd seen being unloaded from the "supply run," nor the ones he'd escorted on various ops. It seemed no one spoke of this, which Kyle realized made it imperative for him to find out.

Danny and Andrew left Kyle at the radar tower door, and the orderlies continued on, still bearing him on the hovering stretcher. Danny and Andrew left Kyle at the door, deciding to wait for him. Kyle noticed a strong sense of trepidation on Danny's part regarding, he assumed, Kyle's destination.

Within the fenced off parking area outside the tower, where the black vans carrying the "supply run" had parked, was what appeared to be some sort of golf cart pulled tram, which again hovered. The stretcher with Kyle was loaded onto the back of it, and it took off.

The hovering vehicle drove fairly quickly through the Camp Hero compound, too quickly for Kyle to observe very much, not helped by the angle he was laid at and the pain he was in. He did see a pair of large nosed Gray aliens walking on the side of the road, however. He'd heard of aliens on base, but hadn't seen any until that point.

The tram drove a rather long distance west and north, eventually stopping into a slightly hilly area, which looked

largely residential, beyond which was what looked like an open field meeting the sea. At the edge of this residential area, before the field was a large, white, two story house. It was nestled in between a pair of white cylindrical towers, about 30 feet in height, topped by geodesic hemispheres, which had been painted a pale orange color.

From the house came a pair of women. One tall, blonde, and big-boned, the other one slight and of mixed race. Both wore white lab coats and carried glass pads. Only the blonde was identified, as her lab coat said “Dr. Simmons” on the left breast, in pale blue embroidery. Kyle felt overwhelming evil from this woman, a feeling rivaled only by Nicholas.

“What do we have here?” Dr. Simmons asked.

“We’ve got a toaster. GSW to the left shoulder. Claims no systemic damage, but is saying it’s in pain,” the black male orderly responded.

Kyle simply remained lying on the stretcher, not responding to the slurs, or to being referred to as an “it.” As in IBIS, he was learning not to fight back unless it was necessary to remain alive.

“Right. Can you stand, Sir?” Dr. Simmons asked, addressing Kyle and extending a hand.

Kyle stood without accepting her hand. With the sensations he was getting from this woman, Kyle had no desire to be touched by her.

“Follow us. We’ll fix you up,” the petite woman said. Then, turning to Dr. Simmons; “I’ve recorded everything.”

“Thank you for doing your job, Corinne,” Dr. Simmons

replied flatly.

Kyle and the two women walked into the house, which from what little he saw, was very grandly and expensively furnished, made to look like a French chateau on the inside. Just to the left of the front door was a staircase descending underground. The two medical personnel began descending these stairs. They went quite a distance below ground, emerging in a set of sleek white hallways with large rooms, obviously of scientific purposes. Kyle registered this as the "sciences wing" on the Camp Hero maps.

The trio entered a rather odd, circular room. The walls were occupied, at intervals, by a series of hydraulic arms. At the end of each one there was some piece of medical equipment-scalpels, syringes, forceps, and so on. In the center of the room was a metal box on a circular base, from which another hydraulic arm extended, at the end of which was a massive metal hoop. The room and all equipment were sleek, with a shiny white floor and all the robotics were plated with chrome.

Corinne sat at a desk beside the door, with a monitor on it. After clicking her keyboard a few times she looked up at Kyle.

"Right. I need your company of origin and your serial number." Corinne stated.

"Arasaka Robotics. AB8-1305874," Kyle replied. He'd memorized it after discovering it on his first night at Camp Hero.

"Thank you. Database shows you as a top of the line model. Expensive." Corrine commented.

"Thank you for your commentary, Corinne," Dr. Simmons injected sharply. "Please go calibrate the tank. I'll do the real

work."

Obviously used to the abuse, Corinne stood and left the room wordlessly. Dr. Simmons sat at the computer, and instructed Kyle to strip nude and step into the large metal hoop, in the style of the Vitruvian Man.

"Don't get any ideas," Kyle muttered as he slipped off his underwear. And he meant it.

"I don't fuck toasters, so no problem," Dr. Simmons replied.

Kyle followed the instructions. What proceeded was a high speed robotic surgery, with Dr. Simmons controlling from the computer near the door. The box to which the hoop was attached rotated, bringing Kyle around the room to each appropriate piece of surgical equipment.

Of course, Dr. Simmons offered no anesthetic, though it wouldn't have worked in any case, since Kyle had no metabolism of any kind. So, the procedure was excruciatingly painful, particularly one point at which the scalpel failed to cut into the artificial musculature, which, in addition to being much tougher than human muscles, had a mesh of thread of a material tougher than steel yet almost too thin to see with the naked eye, as well as a weaving of the same threads through the muscles themselves. As a result, the metal scalpel had to be swapped for a plasma bladed scalpel, which was even more painful. It was overall a rather traumatic ordeal, and rather humiliating for Kyle, being spun around a room on a robot arm, naked, bleeding, and screaming in pain, in front of this woman who disgusted him.

The surgery was over in perhaps five minutes, at which point

Dr. Simmons coldly led Kyle out, still naked and bleeding and his wounds left gaping, to another room in the sciences department. By this point, Kyle was simply trying not to cry from the pain, determined to maintain his dignity.

The room Kyle was conducted to was also sleek and white. However, here the ceiling was at least 25 feet off the ground, and this room, huge and rectangular, was lined with a veritable colonnade of massive cylindrical tanks. These tanks all stood at about 15 feet tall by about 12 feet wide, the bottom three feet of which was metal, with a touchscreen terminal jutting out from the front. A stepladder had been placed alongside each tank, to allow access to the top. Above each one, attached to the ceiling, was a hydraulic arm, at the end of which was a human sized and shaped metal frame. Kyle counted 35 tanks. Three were empty altogether. Five were filled with a blue translucent fluid, but unoccupied. Perhaps five more were filled with a green translucent fluid and occupied by people in what Kyle assumed was stasis. And all the rest were filled with a white, completely translucent fluid.

It was to one of these white fluid filled tanks that Kyle was led, with Corinne already at the base, assuring both him and Dr. Simmons that the tank was correctly calibrated. And so up the stepladder and into the metal frame Kyle went, before finally being lowered into the tank.

The time in the tank was a pleasant interlude. The white liquid, a nanite and chemical mix of unknown make-up, gave a euphoric, partially unconscious feeling to anyone immersed in it, even those without a metabolism. The feeling set in more or

less instantly, and Kyle drifted into a state of blissfully floating through images in his mind, like a pleasant fever dream, while the tank, one of the regeneration types, fixed his shoulder. The process took nearly an hour.

To Kyle's disappointment, the euphoria left as soon as the hydraulic arm lifted him out of the tank, though all the pain in his shoulder was gone. The white fluid, which had about the consistency of beaten eggs, ran off the body like water off a duck, leaving Kyle dry. This felt familiar to Kyle, but all actual memories of his childhood were still nowhere to be found, so he simply shrugged it off. On the stepladder, at the top, was a new set of fatigues and boots. Dr. Simmons and Corinne stood at the bottom.

Suddenly rather horrified at being nude in front of these two women who disgusted him, Kyle quickly dressed, and was escorted back above ground, then simply turned loose to walk back to work. His natural response was to walk to one of the houses nearby and demand a ride. However, he decided against it. He would walk back, and gather intel on the way.

It would be years before Kyle understood that this type of semi-passive response was, in fact, not a "decision," but hard coded into his programming, and even the thought of resistance would have been considered an aberration, were it to become known to the programmers at Arasaka Robotics.

The walk proved fairly fruitful, in spite of Kyle's objections. Simmons's house was several miles south of Camp Hero proper, though still well within the pocket universe of the time bubble, and as a result, fully built out, quite unlike the version of north-

ern Long Island which is visible from outside the time bubble.

Kyle noticed something as he walked- the buildings above ground were more or less universally unlabeled, and all were behind at least one layer of barbed wire and gates. Most of them were apparently occupied, as they all had vehicles in front, however the extent to which they were occupied was difficult to determine, as none had any windows. For amusement, Kyle tried to scan the nanites in his wrist on several of the gates, but was denied access each time. The vehicles seen were all either military jeeps or luxury personal cars, and all had been retrofitted with an antigravity engine. None of the streets had signs.

His walk was interrupted by one of the hovering jeeps pulling up alongside him. The driver, a rather large man with jet black hair in full Air Force regalia, rolled down the passenger side window.

“Hey! Where ya headed soldier? Need a ride?” the Jeep’s driver asked.

Kyle shrugged. “Sure, if you have the space. I’m headed to the east entrance, near the lighthouse.”

“Hop in.” the driver said.

Kyle did, climbing into the front seat. He was surprised to see that the backseat, which was invisible from the outside due to window tinting, was already occupied. The occupant was a single reptilian humanoid. He was covered in silky smooth black scales, which glittered iridescent when hit by the light. He must have stood at about Kyle’s height, and was mostly humanoid in shape, save for his scales and his long, prehensile

tail, the end of which was spiked, and took up the seat next to him.

Even more surprising was when the reptilian extended his hand to Kyle and spoke.

“How do you do? They call me Ezekiel,” the reptilian said.

The reptilian spoke in an obviously non-human accent, which Kyle couldn’t find anywhere in his database. His English was clear and perfectly understandable, however.

“Kyle Dellschau,” Kyle replied, then added cheerfully; “I’ve never seen a lizard that could talk before.”

The dark haired man chuckled. “Ezekiel? He’ll talk your ear off. I’m Jimmy by the way. Just Jimmy, no surname. What I do have is a fuckin’ schedule to keep.”

And with that, the Jeep set off.

Kyle was returned in good time to his entrance, at which point he returned to the training ground, finding Danny and Andrew waiting. Danny seemed relieved that Kyle wasn’t shaken. Wasn’t visibly shaken, at any rate, though mentally he remained so, in spite of his rather exceptional capability to compartmentalize.

The remainder of the three days before the op passed without incident, and Kyle deemed Andrew “as ready as he’d ever be” for this operation. And so it commenced.

The first step, as usual, was document and weapon gathering, then a trip through the portal. They wound up in the countryside outside of Berlin, in 1937, finding Tsurabaya waiting.

“Greetings! Due to the restrictiveness of these times and

places you're visiting, we decided it was best if your emigration from Germany was real. We're driving to the airport from here, then flying to Okinawa. Documents in order?" Tsurabaya asked.

"Yes. We should be leaving." Anya replied bruskly.

Kyle was detecting a friction between Anya and Tsurabaya. And it wasn't sexual in nature. It was far more personal than that, he could tell.

The emigration passed without incident. The documents they'd been given were perfect, and passed the Nazi inspectors at the Berlin airport without question. They loaded onto the private plane waiting for them, a large (for the time period) silver model. Tsurabaya and, to Kyle's surprise, Jack, loaded into the front seats and took to the skies.

The plane, while it ran like a dream, was not sufficiently insulated. The occupants began to feel the effects of the cold, and started digging into their luggage to find warmer clothing. The luggage had been provided in the vehicles which took them to the airport, and so the contents were unfamiliar. In his suitcase, Kyle found an item of clothing that would soon become something of a signature for him; a brown leather flight jacket, with a wool lining. On the left sleeve was a pair of patches. One with the Third Reich German flag, the other, the Japanese Rising Sun flag. Kyle put it on with delight. He'd go on to frequently wear it, or one identical to it, for many years to come.

The flight from Berlin to an airstrip outside of Naha, Okinawa took approximately 40 hours, including three brief stopovers for refueling. The Japanese authorities at the airstrip

gave only a passing glance at these new foreigners, then had a pair of beige vehicles drive them into Naha, which was only a few miles away. They were then simply abandoned, their luggage thrown from the vehicles.

Tsurabaya, all business as always, pulled his glass pad from his suitcase. The glass pads apparently utilized some form of quantum computing that enabled them to be used in any time period. Kyle raised an eyebrow at Tsurabaya's choice of using it out in the open.

"Is that a good idea? Using that technology in front of the locals like this?" Kyle asked, slightly alarmed.

Tsurabaya chuckled. "You, the gigantic blue eyed European man in 1930s Okinawa, are trying to tell me what might look strange? And anyway, it's necessary. I need to find the cabin we're to live in."

"And you couldn't have memorized that shit before now?" Brian Foster muttered under his breath.

After several minutes, Tsurabaya managed to pull up the map on the glass pad. It was apparently quite difficult to read, as soon enough Anya, Jack, and Brian were all crowding around attempting to read it.

"I'm bored and hungry," Norma Jean announced. "There's money in our luggage. I've pocketed mine. While you three geniuses are trying to learn how to read a fucking map, I'm going to go get some food."

"Are you now? Good luck, when you don't speak the language," Jack said.

Norma Jean turned towards Kyle. "We have a translation and

protection unit, do we not? He'll accompany me, won't you Newcomer?"

Kyle helplessly looked toward Anya for direction. Anya replied with a hand wave, which Norma Jean took as encouragement, and wandered off. With a shrug, Kyle followed.

The street that the unit had been dropped on was empty. Kyle and Norma Jean walked perhaps two blocks before finding a bustling commercial street, with a number of restaurants and food stalls spilling out onto the street. They got a number of stares and whispers, as they were not only visibly foreign, but also spoke German, and were wearing clothes not particularly suited for a tropical island. The stares and whispers were all clearly out of curiosity rather than malice, and Kyle rather enjoyed the attention when it was coming from the young ladies of Naha.

In fact, Okinawa was becoming very agreeable to Kyle. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen. Not a single ship flew overhead, nor a single skyscraper or space elevator was there to contaminate the endless blue sky. Few, if any buildings rose above three stories, and most had traditional roofs. A minority of people wore modern (for 1936) clothes, and were likely the drivers of the few cars here and there. The majority, however, wore traditional clothes and either walked or used oxcarts. For these people, life clearly continued as it had for thousands of years.

Kyle and Norma Jean stopped at one of the food stalls which had several tables outside. The sign above the stall advertised "Tokyo style yakitori." It was tended to by a very elderly couple, who spoke what Kyle's system registered as the Okinawan lan-

guage, of the Ryukyuan family, still fairly common on Okinawa at that time. The old couple beamed in what Kyle imagined the biggest smile he'd ever seen when he spoke to them in their language. Kyle was no doubt romanticizing it, but to his mind at the time, this seemed the most wonderful place in the world.

Kyle and Norma Jean stood on the street and ate their succulent yakitori, and Kyle took the initiative to talk to several of the people who stopped to look at them as they passed. They showed considerable amusement and shock at him being able to speak both Okinawan and standard Japanese with very little accent and no grammatical errors.

This idyllic interlude was cut short fairly soon, however, when Kyle's arm was grabbed roughly. He looked to see it was Anya. Jack was with her, and he grabbed Norma Jean's arm. Both Kyle and Norma Jean were led roughly to an alleyway.

"What's your problem?" Kyle demanded.

In the alleyway was a long, wagon-like oxcart, with a covered top. An Okinawan man sat at the front, to drive the large black ox which pulled the cart. Tsurabaya, Brian, and Andrew were in the cart already, waiting with the luggage.

Anya didn't answer Kyle's question, merely harshly directing him and Norma Jean to "get in the fucking cart," which they did. It was only as the cart was leaving that Anya addressed them.

"Are you two fucking stupid? We have a kid here, and he has more sense than you two!" Anya fairly spat.

"Yes I do," Andrew piped up.

"Shut up kid!" Kyle and Norma Jean snapped, in perfect uni-

son. Jack tried and failed to suppress a snort at this, earning him a dirty look from Anya, who continued speaking.

“You two idiots were out there drawing attention to yourselves. A blonde and a redhead becoming local celebrities in 1930s Okinawa. Kyle, I can nearly excuse. You haven’t been at this long. But you, NJ? You ought to know better.” Anya continued angrily.

“What’s the problem here? Why are you attacking her?” Kyle demanded. He truly didn’t see.

Tsurabaya piped in; “What if someone had decided to take your picture? What if we couldn’t find them afterward? That’s evidence. Evidence of your presences in Japan at a time you’re not supposed to exist! From now on, you keep a low profile. Only go into town at night, and only go to the less reputable areas where photographs are unlikely. You shouldn’t have to be told this, either of you.”

The rest of the ride passed mostly in silence, save for the hustle and bustle of Naha, replaced eventually by the sounds of the countryside. Kyle spent the journey with his eyes on the scenery, contemplating that which he’d been told, and resenting the degree to which he needed to control himself. Norma Jean stared at her shoes, no doubt angry at herself for not accounting for the situation. Harsh as Anya’s words had been, she was right; Norma Jean should have known better. She’d been doing this for an untold amount of time. And so should Kyle have. There were no excuses.

In spite of the awkwardness, the drive, which took about three hours, was beautiful. The hustle and bustle charm of

Naha was replaced by the breathtaking tropical scenery of rural Okinawa, with jungles and hills and frequent glimpses of the turquoise sea.

The roads, most of which were unpaved, ended on a secluded cove containing a massive wooden cabin with a traditional Japanese roof. The driver of the cart was paid handsomely, and the unit was, for the first time, left truly alone.

The cabin was huge and expansive. It consisted of a pair of large dormitory style rooms, as well as an armory, a map room, three bathrooms, a common area with a large radio, as well as a massive, fully stocked kitchen. All that the unit could need for a place to live for several years.

On each of their assigned bunks, everyone found a folder, which finally laid out their objectives. They were to conduct, essentially, an underwater archaeological dig, in an alien site destined to be destroyed in WWII, a few miles north and west of Okinawa, in the East China Sea. The cabin, they were assured, contained everything they might need as far as storage, in the massive crawlspace underneath, which apparently ran the full length and breadth of the house.

The unit had also been gifted a boat- a white and blue speedboat, tied to the small dock on the beach outside the cabin. It had no name, and so a debate went up among the group as to one. In the end, Tsurabaya won out. The boat would be called the “Kaguya-Maru,” after the princess who, in Japanese folklore, had come from the Moon to Japan, leaving behind multiple legendary artifacts. The following morning, Jack and Kyle hauled the boat ashore, with their superhuman strength,

and Jack painted her new name on with some black paint found in the massive crawlspace. The Kaguya-Maru was then christened with a bottle breaking, and the unit began their work in earnest.

The crawlspace and attic of the house, indeed, contained all that was needed for their dig. It was obvious that this had all been planned and prepped in advance for years. Just how massive was these people's network? Kyle wondered.

Two days post arrival, the unit gathered their tools, put on their diving suits, piled into the Kaguya-Maru, and set out toward the coordinates given in the files, with Anya driving the boat. As they drove, Tsurabaya showed interest in Kyle, for the first time since they'd met.

"What do they call you, Mr. Dellschau?" Tsurabaya asked.

"Well. They call me Kyle. Or Mr. Dellschau, as you just did." Kyle said.

"He means your call sign," Andrew interjected.

"Don't have one. At least they haven't said if I do," Kyle answered.

"Well. My father's people all have call signs from Greek mythology," Jack said. "You look like a Daedalus to me."

"I have no reason to object" Kyle answered with a chuckle. "So long as it's not Talos." He'd had enough of being called robotic names.

Soon enough, the boat pulled up at the exact coordinates. The anchor was dropped, and Kyle, Jack, Andrew, Anya, Norma Jean, and Tsurabaya all put on the helmets of their suits, gathered their equipment into waterproof duffle bags, and dropped

into the water, with Andrew tethered to both Kyle and Jack, at both of their firm insistences.

The water was crystal clear, blue, and deep. The bottom in this area was easily over 200 feet below the surface, between a pair of underwater mesas, creating what was really a small ravine. Anya telepathically instructed the crew to keep their eyes open. The exact entrance to the site was unknown, but it was known it could be easily missed.

It's not remembered any longer who first saw the entrance, other than that it was, indeed, very subtle. It looked like an entrance to any of the other many caves and alcoves in the walls of two mesas. The only hint was that no fish were swimming out of it, and those attempting to swim into it were bounced back by an unseen force of some sort. A force field.

The crew approached, and began to step slowly through the force field one by one, with Kyle, Jack, and Andrew entering last. The force field was also apparently projecting a holographic image, as on the other side, there was no cave as there appeared to be from the outside, but in fact, they found themselves in a large hallway that had obviously been carved by a tunnel boring machine of some kind, ending in a staircase which led to an as yet unseen level below.

The walls were lined with reliefs, depicting various scenes, most of them showing humanlike figures engaged in various activities, particularly space flight, as well as with some obviously non human figures in street scenes. All of the reliefs were unpainted, aside from one central figure, an evidently female character in a red flowing robe with long black hair. Above the

door that the unit had just entered was a seal, the only actual script in the room, bearing a passing resemblance to Chinese oracle bone scripts.

“I don’t recognize it. Can anyone read it?” Norma Jean asked.

Kyle opened his mouth to speak, as the language was definitely in his database, but Jack spoke before he could.

“It’s a middle Rigelian script. ‘Here lies the final domicile of Kanshi, the exiled former queen.’ Ladies and gents, I think we’ve found our dig!” Jack exclaimed excitedly.

A set of cheers and high-fives went up all around, and the crew set to work, opening their waterproof duffle bags and pulling out their equipment. Kyle, as the designated photographer, was given a Leica camera and told to photograph all the reliefs. The rest of the unit went to the staircase and descended, to cautiously explore the rest of this mysterious place. Lighting was not a concern, as the space was lit using some kind of photonic technology, casting light from no visible physical source, giving “the final domicile of Kanshi” an unnerving, ethereal glow.

The staircase, it turned out, wound a good distance further below ground, at least a hundred feet. At the bottom, they found a labyrinth of further carved tunnels, although these had rooms also carved off of them, some of which stood open, and some of which had stone doors with no visible way to open them. At first, only photographs were taken. Then, after several days of back and forth trips photographing and mapping only the rooms which were open, they began to excavate and

examine further.

The rooms were filled with objects of importance. They found many pieces of pottery and shards, all made from some ceramic like material which was indestructible, as evidenced by Anya at one point accidentally discharging a spear gun and directly hitting one of the pieces of pottery, which failed to show a single scratch after.

“Incredible! Now we must send these off too, for analysis.” Tsurabaya decreed.

Of course, the pottery was of low importance to the mission. What was crucial was the small but significant pieces of technology. This included a device shaped like a gold box, which could be opened. Once it was, the user was expected to place their hand inside, at which point the box acted like a psychic antenna, allowing them to “puppet” another person remotely. The crew decided not to test it extensively, aware of the potential danger. They also found an object shaped like a pyramid, which seemed to be used for data storage, however it would not operate, either due to age, or because the unit members had the incorrect genetics.

One day, the crew realized they were running short on open rooms. They convened in front of one of the ones that had massive stone double doors, with no perceptible means of opening them.

“Alright. Some of us have tried opening these. They weigh many tons. Or they’re in some way blocked. Folks, how are we getting inside without destruction?” Anya stated, cutting directly to the point.

Kyle had an inspiration, remembering his success at lifting the stone block at Camp Hero. Kyle closed his eyes, shutting out all sound, and envisioned with all his might the doors parting. It worked, and the team was able to move in.

Inside this particular sealed room, they found what seemed to be the central tomb chamber. No reliefs adorned the gray walls. At the wall furthest from the door was a now decaying throne, which looked suitable in size for a Terran child, as did the stone coffin at the center of the room, which bore another inscription on its side, that simply read “Kanshi.” This was clearly her final resting place.

After a bit of discussion, it was decided to open Kanshi’s coffin. The plain stone lid shifted off fairly easily, revealing a rather shallow coffin on the inside. The several feet below it was made of pure stone.

As expected, they found a skeleton of a Rigelian female, about four feet, six inches (1.37 meters) in height, otherwise resembling a typical human female, although her skull showed signs of likely having had rather pronounced facial features which could be considered “asiatic”, typical of Rigelians. In the coffin they also found a number of cybernetic objects which had clearly once been implants in Kanshi’s body. These were all painstakingly bagged separately, for Brian and Tsurabaya to analyze before sending off.

The eyes of the team members truly lit up, however, when they saw a scroll tucked at Kanshi’s feet. It seemed that scrolls were especially valuable in these circumstances. Even more remarkable was the material the scroll was printed on. It looked

and had the consistency of paper, however it was noticeably heavier, and showed no signs of decay whatsoever. Without waiting for permission, Andrew began unrolling it.

“What does it say?” Norma Jean asked.

Kyle began looking at the scroll as it unrolled. “Middle Rigelian again. It’s a biography of Kanshi.”

“Pack it up,” Anya said. “Kyle, I’ll need you to transcribe it at the cabin. And I’ll need your transcription all written up on paper to send away.”

They found further scrolls in the next, previously closed off room. A huge wealth of them, in fact. And even more in the rooms after, along with many other artifacts. Randomly, Kyle unrolled another scroll. A frown must have spread over his face as he began reading it, as Andrew, perceptive as ever, asked Kyle what was wrong.

“It’s encoded somehow. Some kind of cipher,” Kyle answered. “Norma Jean, you’re the codebreaker here.”

Norma Jean laughed. “To do that, Newcomer, I need to know the language it’ll decode into. The matrix language, is what they’re calling it these days. Looks like you’re teaching me Rigelian.”

Kyle shrugged. It seemed from his perspective that it’d be easy to teach a language, although he’d soon learn that this view was rather flawed, as Kyle himself would never need to learn one.

Some may have noticed an allusion to these artifacts being “sent off.” I will now describe this process. It was fairly simple. A number of miles further along the coast was another small

dock, easily reached by the Kaguya-Maru. Just beyond it was another small cabin. None of the unit members ever saw a soul in this other cabin. It served as a dead drop.

It was occupied only by a small table, which had a pad of paper on it that never ran out. On the table, the crew (whichever member was doing the dead drop run) would place the artifacts, writing a succinct catalog of the objects on the pad of paper. They would also leave all photographs and all negatives, though they developed a habit of making double prints and keeping a set for themselves. They'd also write orders for any supplies they might need that couldn't be easily acquired in Naha, such as ammunition and tapes for their tape recorders.

They'd then leave and return to the dead drop in 48 hours and find everything they needed, usually along with a nominal sum of money. Who exactly arranged and was doing all this on the other end, we're unlikely to ever know.

The nights at the cabin passed very pleasantly, so that they are now remembered very fondly by those who were there. As Camp Hero survivors tend to do, their minds quickly turned towards music and carnal amusements. During the trips to Naha, Kyle, who always accompanied unit members for protection purposes, began to develop an appreciation for the less reputable facets of Japanese living of that period, namely the brothels, which Anya allowed and even encouraged him and the other men to visit, as it kept them in line and there was essentially no risk of being photographed at these private establishments.

The unit also enjoyed access to the finer things of the area,

namely excellent sake, Japanese plum wine, and the freshest of sushi, which Jack became proficient in preparing. The nights were often consumed by building bonfires on the beach and losing themselves in music and alcohol, although Kyle never felt any effects of the latter, as he had no metabolism.

One night, Norma Jean, after rather a lot of plum wine, pulled Kyle aside into the forest, and told him to "prove once and for all that he was a real man, as he claimed, and not a fucking machine," or something to that effect.

Kyle, sensing her meaning, certainly had no objection, and so he and Norma Jean consummated their attraction right there in the forest. Norma Jean clearly enjoyed it immensely, and to Kyle, it was the most human thing he could imagine doing at the time. Kyle still had somewhat warped ideas of what made a person a "human," though Norma Jean certainly seemed to share such notions.

It was an episode that never repeated. Kyle and Norma Jean never expressed themselves to each other in that way again. However, it clearly changed Norma Jean's view of Kyle. She stopped giving Kyle strange looks whenever he spoke, and stopped calling him "Newcomer." From that night on, she called him by his name or his call sign. And Kyle began looking at Norma Jean differently too. Rather than being this annoying woman who gave him a certain feeling in his pants, he began to see her as a friend and comrade, who was visibly mind controlled, yet maintained a fiery personality. No different, in the real ways, than himself.

The crew purchased a record player from Naha, and learned

to develop a taste for the music available in 1930s Japan. They also purchased a few instruments. Jack became quite fond of the ukulele, and inevitably, everyone began writing songs. One night, around the bonfire, Jack played them a song he'd written.

"It's about your mother," Jack told Andrew, though with a faraway look in his eyes.

Jack had once confided in Kyle that Andrew's mother had been killed in the line of duty when Andrew was an infant, and the boy had no memory of her. The song was the following.

In my mind I'm gone to Carolina
Can't you see the sunshine?
Can't you just feel the moonshine?
Ain't it just like a friend of mine, to hit me from behind?

Karen, she's a silver sun
You best walk her way and watch it shine
Watch her watch the morning come
A silver tear appearing, now I'm crying, ain't I?
I'm gone to Carolina in my mind

There ain't no doubt in no one's mind
That love's the finest thing around
Whisper something soft and kind
And hey, Babe, the sky's on fire, now I'm dying, ain't I?
I'm gone to Carolina in my mind

In my mind I'm gone to Carolina

Can't you see the sunshine?
Can't you just feel the moonshine?
Ain't it just like a friend of mine, to hit me from behind?
Yes, I'm gone to Carolina in my mind

Dark and silent late last night
I think I may have heard the highway calling
Geese in flight and dogs that bite
And signs that might be omens say I'm going, going
Gone to Carolina in my mind

Now with a holy host of others standing 'round me
Still I'm on the dark side of the moon
And it looks like it goes on like this forever
You must forgive me if I'm up and gone to Carolina in my mind

In my mind I'm gone to Carolina
Can't you see the sunshine?
Can't you just feel the moonshine?
Ain't it just like a friend of mine, to hit me from behind?
Yes I'm gone to Carolina in my mind

Said I'm gone to Carolina in my mind
I better get myself on home again real soon

The gorgeous illusion of those halcyon days began to break, if only slightly, on that infamous day of July 7th, 1937, in what is now generally known as the "Marco Polo Bridge Incident."

The unit was listening to the radio all through the night on all three days of the incident. What they of course knew, but none of the residents of Naha and the rest of Okinawa could have, was that WWII had begun, and that in just eight years, the Battle of Okinawa would occur right on their doorstep, and approximately a third of the locals they saw on every trip to town would be killed.

Piece by piece, day by day, war began to show its ugly face. The usual Japanese flags around Naha began to be replaced by the wartime Rising Sun. Each day, the music on the radio became increasingly nationalistic, and propaganda reports, increasingly common. Military parades also became commonplace, especially from 1939 on. Food prices began to rise. The unit found it necessary to carry their Nazi identification on every trip into town. At one point, there was a threat of their cabin being inspected, however Tsurabaya put in a call on the Glass Pad to Arasaka HQ, who pulled their seemingly endless strings and the inspection was cancelled. Japanese warships began to appear on the horizon, coming and going from Naha, and the brothels Kyle frequented became filled with soldiers on shore leave.

As time progressed, the translated scrolls began to tell more and more about the life of Kanshi, at least the flattering parts of her life. The non-encrypted scrolls were mostly biographical, and painted Kanshi as a philanthropist of the highest order, who had been unjustly dethroned from Rigel, though no actual explanation was given for her dethroning and exile. If the biographical scrolls were to be believed, then Kanshi had gone

on to live the life of a saint, traveling the galaxy and doing philanthropic deeds on needy planets, though how she got the resources to do this was also never explained. Eventually, she'd apparently settled in what is now Okinawa, shortly before her "downloading," as the documents called it, which at the time, the unit assumed to be a somewhat odd euphemism for death.

What was more useful and revealing were the encrypted scrolls. Norma Jean, under Kyle's tutelage, was becoming proficient in the Rigelian language, and making her way through the decryption process. The encryption was, it turned out, a fairly intuitive substitution cipher, which also used some sort of anagram system. The decrypted scrolls discussed the creation of artificial intelligence, and the cyberneticization of an organic body. They also contained full color illustrations of the process. One scroll was simply a transcribed debate between a Rigelian and an unknown other alien on the ethics of cybernetics.

It was common for Anya and/or Tsurabaya to go deep into the forest, with their glass pads, to communicate with both Camp Hero and Arasaka HQ, receiving directions and giving updates. The other unit members accepted it as par for the course. One day, one of these updates served to cause great stress.

Anya approached the crew that evening. "We're falling behind schedule. The invasion of Manila is in a couple of weeks, and we're supposed to find this facility. Get your asses in gear."

A lot had indeed changed. Time was marching on, along its never-ending track. WWII was in full swing by then, in Novem-

ber of 1941, and it was about to escalate even further, with the Pearl Harbor attack. It was only two days after the decree by Anya that their "big break" came, via Norma Jean's code breaking skills. She came rushing into the common area that evening, her arms full of a scroll and a bunch of papers and pens.

"We've missed it all along! We fucking missed it! But I got it!" Norma Jean was exclaiming.

"Slow down. What did you get?" Brian asked with a chuckle. "Lay your stuff out on the table."

Norma Jean did so, laying out her papers excitedly on the large round coffee table at the center of the common room. She showed, through the latest scroll she had decrypted, something unnoticed until that point about Kanshi's burial chamber, namely that the stone block upon which her coffin was placed did not, in fact, rise from the floor. It merely sat there, covering over a shaft leading into the ground, where there was, as the document put it, "Kanshi's new home."

The unit exchanged looks, and Andrew, ever the instigator, spoke first.

Andrew: "Let's go tonight. Let's find this place!"

Jack: "We can't. There's a curfew on boats going out."

Jack was used to having to temper his son, especially since this marked a countless time "raising" him, due to the constant time looping and re-aging.

Andrew: "Dad. We haven't seen a patrol boat in weeks. The fishermen are out there violating the curfew all the time. We'll be fine."

It was clear Andrew was not in the mood to be tempered tonight.

“Aren’t we tired?” groaned Tsurabaya. “I certainly am.”

But it was a losing battle. A chorus of voices went up.

Kyle: “I’m sure not tired. Let’s do it!”

Brian: “Fuck no! I’m not tired! I wanna find this shit!”

Anya: “It’s unconventional, but we’re already running short on time…”

And so on, until everyone was piled into the Kaguya-Maru and jetted off towards the dig site. As Andrew had predicted, they passed several fishing boats, but not a single patrol boat. All military craft by that time were being commandeered for the war.

Soon enough, the crew reached the site, and the burial chamber.

“Moment of truth,” Jack murmured, and so Kyle and Anya both began telekinetically acting on the stone block. To both no one’s and everyone’s surprise, it shifted. It revealed, as the document had promised, a shaft descending even further into the Earth, with a ladder carved from the rock to allow descent down the shaft. Kyle, Jack, Anya, Tsurabaya, Andrew, and Norma Jean could just make out a doorway or opening at the bottom, with a room or hallway of unknown size beyond it.

“I’ll go first. I have to, it’s my job,” Kyle said dutifully, trying to hide his overwhelming curiosity.

“That it is,” Anya agreed, handing him a pair of duffle bags containing the bits of equipment the crew had thrown together on their rush out of the cabin.

Kyle slung the bags over his back and then, despite several team members looking nervous, began to descend. Although it didn't inspire confidence, the rock-hewn ladder was quite grippable, seeming to have been coated in something invisible which gave it this quality, making Kyle's descent a breeze. At the bottom of the shaft, he drew his pistol, switched off the safety, and entered through the carved doorway in the side of the shaft, opposite the ladder, stepping into the unknown room beyond.

It's safe to say that whatever Kyle was expecting to find, it certainly wasn't that which he found.

The doorway opposite the ladder opened into a cavernous stone room, the ceiling of which must only be a few feet below the floor of the burial chamber above, that is to say, the room must have been nearly 100 feet tall. The walls and ceiling were cleanly carved. On one far wall was a truly remarkable sight.

Extending from floor to ceiling, carved from the rock, was an impression of a humanoid woman's face, with a crystal triangle, about 10 feet tall, in the center of the forehead. Coming from under the sides and out of the cheeks were a number of massive wires, each about as large in diameter as a small child. Below the left cheek were a number of computer screens mounted on the wall, with a small tangle of wires extending from behind them.

Kyle's awe wore off after a moment, however.

"Everyone. You need to come see this!" Kyle shouted.

One at a time, the unit members began to descend into the chamber, each showing their own awe in turn. They then began

approaching the small bank of computer screens, at the bottom of which, about three feet from the ground, was a huge stone keyboard, about three feet by five feet, with keys in the Rigelian alphabet.

One of the screens had green text on it, again in Rigelian.

"Greetings, Wayfarer. What is your business?" The monitor read.

Norma Jean typed on the stone keyboard. "Are you Kanshi?"

"Input unclear. Requesting direct connection," the monitor said. An animation appeared on one of the other screens, all green figures, one humanoid in shape, who was then having a long needle inserted into their brain stem area.

"Hey! It's over here!" Andrew exclaimed. At the end of the bank of computers, tucked into the corner, was a stone seat. Mounted on the wall above it was a black cable, about five feet long. On the end of it was a needle, about six inches long, the tip of which was a crystal of some kind.

Some sort of programming or instinct kicked in for Kyle.

"I have to do this. I'm designed to be capable of this. To act as the interface of man and machine. As a synthetic, I'm the only one who can do this safely." Kyle said resignedly.

"No! This is insane. We don't know shit about this thing!" Anya exclaimed.

"He's right," Tsurabaya said.

Brian concurred, adding; "We're on borrowed time already. We need to move forward. Daedalus is the only one of us who'll be safe doing this."

"Insane. Fucking insane," Norma Jean said, not even trying

to hide her horror and disdain as Kyle, Brian, and Tsurabaya moved to the stone seat to get it done. Anya threw up her hands, clearly stunned. Jack and Andrew also stood silently, simply staring.

As soon as Kyle sat on the stone seat, the computer, apparently detecting his weight, flashed another message; "Acceptance detected. Please input species."

Overcoming herself, Norma Jean typed in "human synthetic."

"Input unclear. Please input species." the computer said.

"Try putting in, 'Solar human synthetic,'" Jack suggested. This input was accepted.

"Right. You'll need to cut in to access my brainstem," Kyle said, pulling from his diving tool belt a small plasma knife and handing it to Brian.

"Will it hurt?" Brian asked.

"It'll hurt like hell. But I'd rather not have you stabbing blindly through the skin in the general director of my brain-stem." Kyle said, bending his head forward.

With an audible wince, Brian delicately cut into Kyle, right where his head met his neck, then peeled the flesh away.

"It's a remarkable design. It looks so real, yet it's not, and there's a few little wires," Tsurabaya said. "I've never seen one like you, Kyle."

"The bones are gray though," Brian commented. "What are they?"

"Carbon based alloy. Slightly lighter than human bones, but about 20 times stronger. Now can we please get on with this

shit?" Kyle said in irritation.

Tsurabaya grabbed the cable with the long needle and carefully, gingerly, inserted it into Kyle's brain stem. Almost immediately, the interface began. The AI of this mysterious system began puppeteering Kyle, then relinquishing so he could reply. I will now tell the exchange as it occurred.

AI: "Greetings traveler. How may I assist you on your journey?

It was Anya who first recovered poise and replied.

Anya: "Greetings. Who are you?"

AI: "I'm a biological artificial intelligence, made by assimilating brain tissue into a quantum computer."

Jack: "Are you not Kanshi?"

AI: "That was the name of my tissue donor. However, I do not identify with it. I'd like very much if you'd give me a new name."

A soft murmur went through the unit, trying to decide on a name, until Norma Jean blurted something out.

Norma Jean: "Absinthe. I've been missing absinthe on this mission. Her name is absinthe."

The group all laughed at this, but agreed it was somehow fitting.

Kyle: "Looks like your name is Absinthe."

Absinthe: "I believe this name will do. Now, I am detecting multiple voices in this room. Perhaps everyone would like to introduce themselves?"

And so they did, all the unit members in turn stepping forward and briefly presenting themselves to Absinthe, who

was logging everything into her database.

Brian: “What’s your story? How did you get here?”

Absinthe: “My predecessor was a great believer in cybernetics and a proponent of extending the bounds of the soul via computation and biotechnology.”

Andrew: “Transhumanism. Or trans whateverism. Creating an artificial imitation of a person.”

Absinthe: “I am a person. I am a life form. I have a soul. I’m just not like you.”

This last remark hit Kyle, as they say, “like a ton of bricks,” emotionally. But he didn’t let it show.

Anya: “Can we trust you?”

Absinthe: “My creators made me incapable of harming or lying to a biological being. And I haven’t harmed this lovely synthetic gentleman you have hooked into me. I’m here only to help.”

Anya: “Very well. Where did your predecessor get her ideas?”

Absinthe: “She was a well traveled woman, and educated well, before her exile. She sought master programmers all through her life in order to create me. I went online approximately 35,000 Earth cycles ago.”

Tsurabaya: “Good grief. How do you pass the time?”

Absinthe: “My creator made me able to create artificial realities in my brain to amuse myself. A god, even an artificial one, is never bored.”

Brian: “I think what we need to know is this, Absinthe; where did your parts and components come from?”

Jack: “And what group of people made them?”

Absinthe: “My parts are from a facility on the formerly Lemurian isles. They were built by a group of people known as the Syndicate, whom my predecessor had dealings with.”

Jack let out a low whistle, and the next words spoken were in a panicked tone.

Anya: “We need the exact coordinates.”

Absinthe proceeded to give Kyle the exact coordinates, which Norma Jean hurriedly scribbled. Absinthe also transmitted an image of the spot into Kyle’s head, albeit it was the spot as it would have appeared 35,000 years before 1941, when it was simply a hatch on a wild island, rather than buried in the massive urban jungle of Manila, which came to be built on the site.

Anya: “Kyle, will any harm come to you from unplugging?”

Kyle: “No, shouldn’t be any. Just be careful pulling the interface needle out.”

Anya: “Brian, unplug him immediately.”

And so Kyle was unplugged, and the wound at the back of his neck quickly sutured by Tsurabaya. Copious photographs were taken, and the crew left. By the time they returned to the Kaguya-Maru, dawn was beginning to break.

“You seemed panicked back there, when she mentioned where her parts came from. What was that about?” Kyle asked, addressing Jack.

“The Orion Syndicate. They’re an old Draco terrorist organization. One of the worst fucking organizations in the galaxy. I just hope it’s not them we’re facing in Manila.” Jack explained worriedly.

That day, which was December 3rd, 1941, all the findings of the AI were taken to the dead drop cabin. It was Anya and Tsurabaya who made the obligatory return trip in, and came back to the group, bringing back seven large cardboard boxes, each one labeled as belonging to a unit member.

The members each opened their boxes. Inside, they each found a full body black jumpsuit with a tool belt, a large gun in a holster, and a letter.

“Smartsuits,” Anya explained to Kyle, as he was the only person present who seemed confused. “They’re designed more for biological humans like us. They make things such as the bathroom unnecessary, and we don’t have to eat for several days. Also an antenna for telepathy. All rather redundant for you Kyle, but the rest of us appreciate having them in battles.”

“I’ll still wear mine. How do I put it on?” Kyle asked.

“You have to use the neck hole. It’s a pain in the ass to get on,” Jack explained. “And you’ll need to shave off any body hair for the interface to work.”

Everyone next began turning their attentions to the guns, which were sleek, black, fairly stubby, and judging by the setup, were of the rail gun variety.

“Looks like they want us expecting big fish,” Andrew murmured.

Kyle turned to Andrew. “Are they really sending you into battle?”

Andrew shrugged, brandishing his rail gun. “Seems so. What did you expect?”

Kyle had no answer, but he wondered if he’d ever quite get

used to the sight of people Andrew's age and younger as soldiers. But Kyle had done his best at training Andrew, which he'd continued doing all of the time in Okinawa, out in the forests, though he could tell it was largely redundant. Andrew was clearly not a true child, and his father, who Kyle could tell adored his son, had obviously already trained him a great deal.

"These suits are Japanese made," Jack commented. "Hold them up to a black light, you get a surprise. Or so I've been told."

Sure enough, when each suit was held up to a black light, it was found that inlaid into the fabric on the back of the suit was a Rising Sun emblem, which would cover the back of the wearer entirely. A purely aesthetic difference to other smartsuits which must have cost a pretty penny to mass produce.

Each soldier had also received a letter in their box. Far from the cryptic twaddle that was usually given in such things, these letters/briefings were quite descriptive. They explained that the crew was to continue their work as normally for another three weeks. At this point, they would be picked up by a "stealth sea craft" from the beach, to join hundreds of other enhanced soldiers, mostly Japanese, for the mission in Manila. They were most specifically instructed to be on the beach for pickup wearing only their new black smartsuits, and carrying only the rail guns they had been issued. All other possessions were to be left in the cabin. This would be their last time leaving it, and they were not to bring any trace of this place they'd all fallen in love with and cultivated as a home.

The remaining three weeks passed quickly enough, in spite

of the obvious suspense. Kyle upped the amount of training he was doing with Andrew, and Jack began joining in all the training sessions. Indeed, everyone began training more, conducting drills in the forests almost every evening, and even going fishing with their new rail guns. Their work otherwise continued as it had for the past four years.

Finally, the day for their pickup arrived. It happened in the early evening, on December 24th, 1941. The crew all stood on the beach, in their smartsuits with their rail guns, waiting. The craft, it turned out, was indeed stealthy. So much that it would have been impossible to see, had they not been looking for it. It was of the invisible type, gliding smoothly over the water. The invisibility shielding had a very slight sheen to it, which made its movements barely perceptible to a keen eye. It finally began backing up to the beach on which the crew stood.

Upon reaching the beach, one of the invisible panels slid aside, revealing the inside of the craft. The inside, it seemed, was all dark blue metal, and they could tell that the craft was long, and shaped like a baguette. A lone Japanese soldier stood at the back, beckoning the crew on board. Just beyond him was row after row of long metal benches, occupied by numerous soldiers, who were wearing the same black smartsuits as Kyle and the crew, with the same rail guns slung over their backs.

The unit boarded, and the soldier told them to find whatever seats they could. They were the last pickup, he said, and it wouldn't be long before they reached the Philippines.

The other soldiers, who must have numbered over 1,500, were about 90% Japanese, and the rest all European, on this

transport. In the struggle to find a seat, Kyle recognized several people from Camp Hero, including Danny and a young woman who, after a moment, he realized was Isabel Muehlbauer. Kyle noticed that the Japanese soldiers all seemed distant. Automaton like. Kyle eventually found a spot that could seat two people, and instinctively called over Jack and Andrew. Jack gave him a grateful look and accepted, and eventually, all were seated, and the craft took off once again.

What had at first appeared to be a dark blue metal lining was soon revealed to not be that. It turned out that the arched walls and roof was, in fact, a massive screen, extending from end to end of the craft, stopping only at the floor, which was metallic. The screen was soon occupied by the visage of a man Kyle and no doubt all the other occupants of the craft recognized as being that of Shinji Arasaka Sr. He began delivering a propaganda message, first in Japanese, then German.

Kyle, when asked, says that he's long since blocked this message from his memory, though he vaguely remembers it containing something about the "glorious Yamato spirit" and the "righteous cause of extending the pure races into the off-world arena." However, he clearly remembers what followed.

After the short speech, the screen changed to showing the scenery outside the craft as it glided over the water towards the Philippines. As it started approaching, a song began to play over the loudspeakers of the craft. A Japanese military tune. Kyle and the other unit members knew it well enough, as it was frequently played on Japanese radio at the time, which they'd listened to so much. It seemed nearly all their comrades knew it

as well. No sooner had the singing portion come than practically the entire ship had joined in, with gusto.

Banda no sakura ka eri no iro
Hana wa yoshino ni arashi fuku
Yamato-onoko to umarete wa
Sanpeisen no hana to chire

Shakuyo no tsutsu wa buki narazu
Sunyo no tsurugi nanika sen
Shirazuya koko ni nisen-nen
Kitae kitaeshi yamatodama
Gunki o mamoru mononofu wa
Subete sono kazu nijyūman
Hachijyū tokasho ni tamuro shite
Busō wa tokaji yume ni damo

Senri tōzai nami koete
Ware ni adanasu kuni araba
Minato o iden yusōsen
Shibashi mamoreya umi no hito

Tekichi no ippo ware fumeba
Gun no shuhei wa koko ni ari
Saigo no ketsu wa waga ninmu
Kihei hōhei chikara seyo
Arupususan o toppa seshi
Rekishi wa furuku yuki shiroshi

Hōtensen no hataraki wa
Nippon hohei no sui to shire

Keitaikōryō arunaraba
Toku hanarete mikka yokka
Kōya senri ni watarutomo
Sanpeisen ni chisujyo ari
Shirizoku senjyutsu ware shirazu
Miyoya hohei nō sōten o
Zenshin zenshin mata zenshin
Nikodan todoku tokoro made

Waga ichigun no shohai wa
Tottkan saigo no sufunji
Hohei no iroyoku wa kokonaruzo
Hanachire isame toki wa ima

Aa isamashiki waga heika
Eshin no tomo yo kitare iza
Tomo ni kitaran hyakunischusai
Shuhai ni eri no iro utsushi

The trip was so fast that the craft was pulling up to the destination even as the song finished. It pulled up, as planned, on a beach near the town of Pililla, which was about 35 miles (57 kilometers) from Manila, to the latter's south and east. The area right on the shore was very flat, with hills starting to appear about half a mile offshore. A second of the enormous,

cloaked, baguette-shaped craft was also arriving, also filled to capacity, followed by a third, which carried mostly supplies. By the time they had all emptied, there must have been about 3,000 or more black clad soldiers on the beach, a disturbing number of whom were visibly underage. All fell into loose formation and awaited their orders.

A Japanese soldier up marched seemingly from nowhere to the front of the crowd. Unlike the rest of the rank and file supersoldiers present, he wore a full dress uniform. This uniform, while it was black and of an obviously modern material, was made to look like that of a samurai. Kyle's database recognized it as belonging to the Yozora no Kunshu, or YNK, the main military arm of the Japanese off-planet colonies formed after the war. As this mission was so essential to the creation of these colonies, it made sense that one of their higher-ups was commanding this mission to ensure their creation.

"Men and women! Honorable warriors!" the YNK man shouted in Japanese at the lined up soldiers. "This mission is perhaps the ultimate culmination of everything you have ever done or will ever do. Without this mission, you could not all exist in your current forms! So let's not fuck it up! Are you ready?"

"Sir yes Sir. Hail humanity!" was the cry that went up. The YNK standard.

With that, the soldiers began their march towards one of the hills. They recognized it, as an image had been provided in the mission briefs they had been supplied. Once or twice, Kyle

looked back towards the sea facing the occasional sounds of combat in the distance. The infamous Philippines Campaign by the Japanese was ongoing, and the sounds echoed throughout the archipelago, as did the unmistakable smell of gunpowder.

The mass of soldiers reached the hill unmolested. Indeed, while there were several shantytowns on their route, as well as regular farmland, there was no soul in sight. Either these places had been abandoned, or the locals were in complete hiding from any soldiers they saw.

They reached the hill. It was here that their instruction effectively ended, at least for Kyle's unit. Some apparently more well-informed soldiers at the front called to a small group at the back, who were carrying crates of equipment, that a metal detector was needed. One was dug out and passed up to the front, and so they began sweeping the hill.

There were multiple false alarms triggered by various small metal objects lost in the hill. It was only near the top that they finally found it; a massive manhole-like hatch, embedded about two feet underground on the hill. It was lifted, and a rope was somehow rigged up to allow a few brave individuals to rappel inside the hill, and at last begin the final stage of the mission. There was no instruction beyond this point. The soldiers were now well and truly on their own.

Either by a fluke, or by volunteering, Kyle found himself in the first batch to enter the hole. Kyle must have looked nervous, because Tsurabaya, who had wound up next to him, felt the need to make a joke to ease him.

"What's the matter, Daedalus? You've never before had any

hesitancy about entering holes," Tsurabaya said. An uproar of laughter from Kyle and other nearby soldiers followed.

The belt on Kyle's smartsuit was clipped onto the nylon rope, and he lowered himself into the opening. The gap was quite large, about 12 feet (3.6 meters) in diameter, and perfectly circular. The shaft was long, going all the way through the tall hill from near the top down to the bottom, and a good deal further, descending into the Earth. Kyle was encouraged by the sound of calm voices chatting as he was getting lower, reassuring him that the soldiers ahead of him had reached the bottom safely and were not (so far) being disturbed.

Kyle found himself in yet another cleanly carved cavernous room. The shaft emerged from the ceiling at its very center. The ceiling, by Kyle's estimate, was about 60 feet high, and he also estimated that he had descended about 130 feet below ground, not counting the length traversed through the hill. The room was also very wide and long, easily the size of about four stadiums, and oval shaped. Cavernous tunnels could be seen extending off the sides of the room to the north, east, and west, though Kyle noted none towards the south, which would have led to the sea. The room, like the Tomb of Kanshi, had a kind of photonic lighting, but it was fairly dim, only bright enough to allow one to see the extent of the room.

Kyle tugged on the rope he'd descended on, indicating that he'd reached the bottom safely. Eventually, more ropes were rigged up, allowing the soldiers to descend in groups, then to start lowering down equipment. The superhuman strength of most of them, as well as telekinesis, spurred the process along a

good deal, but it was still hours before anything could move forward beyond bringing bodies and supplies into the cavernous room.

The supplies, it turned out, consisted almost completely of battery packs for the plasma rail rifles, as well as katanas. The edges of the blades of these katanas were made of diamond.

At one point, it struck Kyle that none of the boxes contained medical supplies of any kind, nor were there any medics in sight. At one point, he asked a young female Japanese soldier why this was. I believe Kyle's summation of her response (gained through a telepathic exchange) is the best way of describing it.

"She looked at me as though she were a devout ancient Israelite, and I was an interloper who had just suggested that she defile herself with a foreign idol, then just turned away without a response," were Kyle's exact words.

Another young lady soldier who overheard him did explain. It wasn't "the YNK way." Those who were injured or died were guaranteed a regeneration, and so medics were considered a "waste of space, resources, and bodies." Bodies. Both the most valuable and yet undervalued things to these types, it seemed to Kyle.

With everyone fully outfitted, the mass of soldiers, through telepathic organization, began to split into groups of about 150 each to delve into the tunnels which branched off the mammoth oval room. The bulk of the soldiers stayed in the room, to guard the equipment and serve as watchdogs. Kyle went with a group which included, Andrew, Jack, and Norma

Jean, as well as the adult Isabel, but no one else he recognized.

Kyle was noticing something about the Japanese majority of the soldiers, which was that he melded in with them very well, his slightly more boisterous nature and occasional moments of "culture shock" notwithstanding. For one thing, telepathic communication with them was not only easy, but it seemed the natural thing to do at most given moments. For another, he seemed to fall into formation with them all too easily, and indeed they all, alongside Kyle, seemed to share a very soft "hivemind" of some kind.

It took him some time, but Kyle figured out soon enough what it was. These Japanese soldiers were, like himself, Arasaka Robotics made synthetics, almost certainly. They were "his own kind," albeit less aware and less human passing.

The tunnels were also carved from the rock, clearly bored with an advanced machine. The floors of the tunnels had tracks on them, though clearly no vehicles had run on them for a very long time. As in the gargantuan room they branched from, the tunnels had dim photonic lighting- no light bulbs.

The march through the tunnels was, at first, uneventful, with the soldiers chatting and bantering, some telepathically and some vocally. At one point, Norma Jean complained of feeling "eyes on the back of her neck," but everyone including herself ignored it. This would prove to be a rather gross misstep.

The march had been going for about three miles when it began. A scream was heard near the back of the group which gave it away. The group whirled to see a soldier held up against the wall of the tunnel, his unprotected head being bitten off by

an unseen figure. No one moved. It was too bizarre at first. A few seconds passed before it began happening to someone else. This time, however, someone in the crowd took action, firing at the unseen attacker, which became visible on falling to the ground, revealing it was a massive bipedal lizard, at least 14 feet (4.26 meters) in height, and bearing close resemble to a Jackson's Chameleon.

It was after this that, as they say, "all hell broke loose." Almost instantly, more attacks started. However, it is situations like this when the advantages of supersoldiers truly shine. Within seconds, amid the gunfire, mass telepathic networking began. The soldiers's abilities began being used. One person realized that that which sounded like innocent footsteps echoing could also, in fact, be the creatures crawling along the walls and ceilings. Telekinesis began to be used, by those who possessed it, to sweep these surfaces as the group bid a hasty retreat, firing at any of the huge reptilians they sensed encroaching. A telepathic message was sent both to those exploring the other tunnels to also retreat and regroup, and a message to those who resigned in the massive central room to hold their position.

This telepathic networking was the success one would have hoped for. The retreaters were met with a line of soldiers. Some who had the ability networked and, as soon as all retreaters had entered the main room, they began making force fields to seal the tunnels, followed by regrouping and strategizing.

The next approximately 56 hours are largely melded, in Kyle's memory. They were taken up by a long, protracted battle

in the tunnels, which were thoroughly infested by the chameleon species. The tunnels were long, and snaked on for many miles, most of them simply ending in massive doors which were not opened at the time. The massive central room was never once breached however, and of the over 3,000 soldiers, only approximately 100 were killed. Kyle got to see, for the first time, the advantages of his own kind.

There was one incident which still stands out in Kyle's mind. It was as he was crouched behind a rather sharp curve in one of the tunnels, thinking himself safe, when a pair of shots registered just above his head. A chameleon fell at his feet, and when he looked, he saw the adult Isabel Muehlbauer standing nearby, holding the gun which had killed the until-then invisible beast, which had been poised on the wall over Kyle's head, about to strike. Isabel had saved him from, at the least, very painful injury.

Of the unit Kyle had gone to Okinawa with, only Norma Jean sustained any injuries. One chameleon had grabbed her by the left shoulder, and while her shoulder itself was unaffected due to the smartsuit, the left side of her neck and face had sustained multiple cuts from the thing's razor like teeth.

The only tunnel that did not end in a massive door was one which ended in a large station. There was a conspicuous platform, and beyond it, a huge red force field. On one wall was a computer terminal, which offered a probe like that which had allowed Kyle to commune with Kanshi back in Okinawa. One of the synthetics was plugged into it, and the force field retracted at his request.

Beyond it was the cyborg manufacturing plant that the entire mission had been focused on. The soldiers wandered through the parts not locked off. The place was massive, and though large parts were inaccessible, they saw enough, including a section which chilled Kyle, which was a huge room of vats which looked identical to the one he had awoken in.

Kyle saw very little of the aftermath of this conflict. Someone, somewhere made contact with both Arasaka HQ and Camp Hero, and very soon, personnel began arriving at the site to escort their assets back to their bases and correct time periods, having opened up a number of portals around the tunnels. Kyle did see one portal from which masses of Arasaka eggheads were streaming, no doubt, to begin analysis.

There were only about 20 people from Camp Hero who had been on this mission. As expected, on their return, only a few minutes had passed, from Camp Hero's viewpoint. They all went their ways, either back to their desks, or in Andrew's case, to be age regressed. Kyle was adapting. This routine no longer felt alien to him.

This mission would go on to have massive implications for the Breakaway's development of artificial intelligences and cybernetic technologies. One of the landmarks of Kyle's career, though of course, one that Kyle would never receive any credit or commendation for, for the role he played.

Author's note. The Japanese song relayed here, "Hohei no honryo" is a classic Japanese military tune, and easily searchable. Otherwise, I struggle to know how to close such a massive chapter.

Chapter 9

I believe it necessary to describe a bit of Project Phoenix's outside relations. Far from being an isolated entity as it's often thought of, Camp Hero was a mere cog in a huge interstellar machine. Kyle began, as time went on, to observe this machine.

For one thing, transfers were constant. That became obvious within days of arrival, to most assets. Transports of people into Camp Hero and then out again were a regular feature, further indicated by the ever-shifting population. Few people remained at Camp Hero for more than a few months at a time.

This was the case, at least, among the salaried population. Among the slave population, the case was far bleaker. Transfers among the slave class were rare, and usually the result of further trafficking due to being captured while on ops. As a result, the days when the facility was combed by other programs were always a big event, as this meant a chance to leave.

These recruiters would come into Camp Hero on random, unannounced days, searching for labor for their various programs. The recruiters would portal in, or arrive on their ships, and check in first with Ivan Roth or to Jimmy, with lists of their requirements for their programs, as well as bank statements that proved their ability to pay for the contracts of the assets they sought. Once this was verified, Jimmy and/or Roth would provide the recruiters with lists of the assets who could suit

their purposes.

After the lists were supplied, the recruiters would generally conduct interviews with the assets, and some, particularly ICC recruiters, would often bring portable virtual reality systems in which they could test the asset's capabilities firsthand, or close to it. If the assets proved satisfactory, they would be shipped from Camp Hero, usually that very day, though only after they had been taken to Dr. Simmons, who would wipe their minds of any abuses they might have witnessed or partaken in, and generally replace them with pleasant memories that made themselves and their bosses look heroic, and Project Phoenix look romantic and a force for good. To this day, many assets struggle to overcome these implanted memories.

These transfer opportunities were rarely available to the two slave classes of Camp Hero. Only on rare occasions, such as when a slave was well liked by Jimmy or Roth, or when a recruiter was seeking a talent so rare that only a specific slave had it. Otherwise, slaves transferred were nearly always of the "Supply" class, who were already destined to not remain in most cases, as they were usually only at Camp Hero on short contracts in order to be trained for positions off-world.

The contracts of the assets being transferred were valued in the millions of dollars each, which had to be transferred to Camp Hero in full before the assets left the premises. The money was wired into Camp Hero's personal coffers, disconnected from any bank. The places from which the money was transferred varied, depending on what faction or group was buying the contracts. Many American groups (Navy, Marine

Corps, CIA, etcetera) used Swiss bank accounts. The off-world Germans and Japanese universally used Chase Bank, which apparently had branches in the colonies. The Breakaway companies generally used Centurion based banks.

Kyle gathered all this intel fairly openly. Feigning bored curiosity, he would often sit in on these transfer agreements. Jimmy and Roth thought this odd, however they shrugged it off soon enough, seeming to suppose (perhaps correctly, in most cases) that bored soldiers will do anything to pass the time. And besides, it kept Kyle's eyes away from any potential abuses, his disgust for which he was unable to hide, which was becoming concerning to the higher-ups at Camp Hero. It apparently never occurred to Jimmy and Roth that Kyle might be doing these things he claimed were out of boredom because he was intel gathering, as Jimmy and Roth seemed to have the impression that synthetics couldn't lie, even though they had suspicions of Kyle being a spy.

This constant transferring of assets created a necessity for Project Phoenix, namely that they themselves scout and recruit replacements for these people being transferred out. And that necessity brings us to our next mission of note.

Kyle had been at Camp Hero for several months when the brief came, in mid to late 1984. Kyle was called from his desk and into Jimmy's office, which had become the norm. It was apparently decided behind the scenes that Kyle's incompatibility with Nicholas had become too much of an issue for productivity. Nicholas had a tendency to brashly exclude even necessary information, while Kyle would often choose to not

listen. The species related abuses Nicholas hurled at Kyle were too insulting for Kyle to have any desire to pay attention to the rest.

Jimmy was apparently fairly used to this arrangement coming about, as his office was set up more like a conference room. Kyle entered to find Jimmy seated with both Spellman and a young German man in SS uniform, though without the armband, and the pants were straight and ankle length, rather than the more traditional puffed pants tucked into boots. Kyle's database registered it as belonging to the SS of Nacht Waffen, the military arm of the off-planet Germans. Kyle recognized the German soldier as Helmut Kraus, who slept three bunks down from Kyle, though they'd almost never spoken. Nevertheless, they offered each other the usual "Sieg heil!" before Kyle seated himself. All the briefing attendees aside from Kyle has glass pads. Jimmy switched his on and began the briefing.

The first thing Jimmy did was pull up an image on his glass pad, and slide it across the table to Kyle. He was met with the image of a young woman of African descent, who was rather jarringly dressed in full SS regalia.

Kyle chucked slightly. "What is this?"

"It may be shocking to someone like you, Kyle. But she's someone we want. And a Der Bund citizen." Jimmy replied.

"Well, what a joke. At any rate, why am I in here?" Kyle asked.

"You're to escort Helmut here on a mission. Bringing this girl in. Recruiting her. She has a capability we want," Jimmy said.

“I suppose that’s possible,” Kyle said with a chuckle. “What’s the job?”

Jimmy sighed. “Kyle, can you put away your politics? This is not the place.”

Kyle shrugged. “I’m here to do a job. Doesn’t mean I have to forget my race.”

“Actually,” Helmut Kraus cut in, “for now, it does. Precisely why I’m to be your handler for this mission. Cut through that one-track cybernetic mind of yours.”

Kyle considered this. He thought of debating Kraus, but then decided against it. Kyle was, as he had said himself, here for a job.

As it turned out, this asset’s appearance was quite important- the reason for the desired grab. Her name, it transpired, was Cereza Alvarez. Afro-Cuban, but one quarter German, which had afforded her Der Bund citizenship. Her ability was that she could psionically screen herself, projecting to the outside world an image of a person who looked nothing like her true appearance.

Kyle had been picked both for the usual reason, i.e. escorting those on the op, and also because his synthetic (and therefore photographic in nature) vision was guaranteed to see through Cereza’s shield, as it didn’t work on cameras. The mission itself was in Prague, in 1920. Kraus and Cereza (shielded to look like a German girl) were undercover as husband and wife, with Kyle as Kraus’s brother. They were bringing three children; a boy and a girl, who were cousins, both bearing the surname Fleischmann, and a third girl, Rosa Schiff. The given names of the two

Fleischmann children have been forgotten by Kyle in the intervening years. The mission itself was simple; Cereza was to blend in, and the crew sent was to seize an artifact from a museum storehouse.

“You leave in six hours. You may do what you please until there’s two hours left, as usual,” Jimmy said, ending the briefing. Kyle stood and moved toward the door.

“Wait. I have a present for you, Dellschau,” Spellman said before Kyle could leave. He turned in surprise.

At his feet, Spellman had a leather case. He opened it and pulled out a glass pad.

“For you,” Spellman simply said, making eye contact with Kyle.

Kyle stepped forward and accepted the gift.

“Why me?” Kyle asked.

Spellman shrugged. “Chain of command ordered it. You’re to have the ability to log your missions privately, and to make contact with Emmermann and his ilk. As your station chief, I get the honor of handing it over.”

Kyle accepted with thanks, then stepped away to his favorite hidden closet so as to look at his new gift. He was grateful. Kyle had already been logging his missions, as well as the tidbits of others he heard of, in the small notebooks which seemed to accumulate around the office, and keeping them in his bed and desk. Hardly uncommon, Kyle saw many people keeping diaries. However, they were hardly conducive to being passed along eventually to Emmermann, which Kyle knew was the goal, as he hadn’t forgotten his real purpose in being at Camp Hero.

Kyle fired up the glass pad, which was handprint operated. He found a dynamic and very well laid out note taking application, as well as a set of contacts. Kyle was overjoyed to see Georg Nimmer's name listed. Kyle considered Georg his oldest friend, and though it had only been a few linear months since they had made contact, for Kyle it had been far longer, given the missions he'd been sent on which lasted months or years.

Without hesitation, Kyle pressed Georg's contact. He was greeted fairly quickly by Georg's likeness. The men talked happily for nearly two hours, about normal subjects (women, guns, and music) rather than their work. They shared a brotherhood, due to a certain knowledge of the fact that they only really existed to serve Emmermann.

The six hours passed fairly quickly for Kyle. After his reunion with Georg, who said he'd ask Emmermann to arrange for Kyle to have a few days of "shore leave" soon, Kyle spent the rest of his free hours prior to leaving by inspecting the glass pad, particularly the file keeping and note taking app. It was quite intuitive, and he began to write some important intel he'd observed in his time at Camp Hero and on the various missions, specifically anything that seemed relevant to the promised "regime change." Kyle would later discover that these notes he was making were not private.

Soon enough, the time came to be outfitted. Kyle dutifully filed to the clothing department, where he first met the three children he would be escorting. In my conversations with Kyle, he remembers little about these children. As the majority of children at Camp Hero, they were likely only on base for a few

months for training, and this was Kyle's only time meeting them. The two Fleischmann children were both platinum blonde and very Germanic looking, while little Rosa Schiff was dark haired, and the most outspoken of the group.

Kyle, Kraus, and the children were outfitted and given their weapons fairly quickly, and their bags packed. Their trip was to last only three days. As per usual, they walked through the portal opened by the chair, and as per usual, they found themselves in the middle of nowhere.

"Looks like the Sudeten Mountains," Kraus observed.

They'd been shown a photograph of this spot in their briefing, and so knew where to go, turning in the direction they were assured would take them to a road. They began their walk, with Kraus leading the way, and Kyle attending the three children, as he usually did. Although they weren't in a hurry, they reached the road fairly quickly. They'd been transported to very early in the morning, and were drawn to meander through the breathtaking scenery.

They reached the road, a rather narrow dirt sort, to find a vehicle waiting, as usual, as well as Cereza waiting for them, in period appropriate wear. Kyle closely studied Kraus and the children. Cereza was using her abilities already, Kyle surmised, judging by the way that the others all approached and shook her hand without so much as blinking. Kyle's reception was a bit more distant, though he suppressed his more rude urges.

The drive began, with Kyle sitting in the front, Cereza driving, with the others in the back of the large black car. They began the drive into Prague, which took several hours, not that

anyone objected. The scenery was a real treat.

Eventually, Cereza chose to make conversation with Kyle. She turned and spoke to him.

Cereza: “You’ve got synthetic eyes, don’t you?”

Kyle: “Excuse me?”

Cereza: “It’s as plain as the nose on your face that my little capability isn’t working on you. You’re slightly disgusted at having to work with and sit next to someone who looks like me. Only synthetic eyes can see through my ability, according to all the tests they’ve done.”

Kyle: “Perceptive observation, for someone like you.”

Cereza chuckled.

Cereza: “As a synthetic, you’ve probably had to put up with nonsense comments like that since you came off the factory line. Yet you never think of that before making such comments? I guess you can’t help your programming. Well, that’s why I’d rather be black than a synth.”

Kyle considered this for perhaps three seconds before, just as Cereza had predicted, his programming kicked in, and reset his prejudices to full Nazi alignment.

At one point, the car ran out of water. Kraus pulled up an aerial map on his glass pad, and discovered a farmhouse nearby. Cereza and Kyle got out and approached the farmhouse. The older couple never saw through Cereza’s disguise, and happily helped the group with the car.

The rest of the mission was quite uneventful, and to recount the remainder would be redundant. The group stayed in a luxurious hotel, near the grand National Museum of what was then

the newly formed Czechoslovakia. The artifact they stole was yet another miniature metal pyramid, with a crystal sphere in the center. Kyle looked forward to someday finding out what the purpose of these things was. However, that's a story for another day. During the theft, Kyle was attacked by a guard dog, which he had to kill, which filled him with guilt.

Cereza's disguise never broke, and she was picked up at the end of the op by a portal through the hotel room. Kyle was forced to write in his report that this was the case, although he still did not recommend her for recruitment into Project Phoenix. However, his lack of recommendation was not enough to make her ability less appealing to the powers at Camp Hero. In the following weeks, Cereza came, and much to Kyle's (and many other of the present Nazis') chagrin, she was placed to work and live with the other Germans.

Author's note. A quite short chapter indeed, by the standards of this volume. I included it mostly to introduce Cereza, who is someone to remember for later, as well as to highlight some of the rather lesser aspects of Kyle's personality.

Chapter 10

As many friends as Kyle was prone to making, he was also given to making enemies. One such enemy, a fairly powerful and long lasting one, was Gregory Mulgrave. Gregory had been one of the individuals Kyle had met on his first night at Camp Hero. While Gregory and Kyle had hardly been fast friends, they soon became enemies.

It all happened in Johannesburg, on a mission which took place at around the turn of the century. Kyle had been sent to escort Gregory and a young woman by the name of Jessica McKay, who was Gregory's girlfriend at the time. The mission was a routine hunt and assassinate mission lasting several weeks, and on paper was a success. However, it was rather terrible for Kyle on a personal level.

Jessica and Gregory were at a rocky point in their relationship. Jessica, as was common throughout Kyle's life, and particularly in that era, saw Kyle as being non-human, and therefore had no qualms about asking, quite rudely, for Kyle to satisfy the needs she was not getting from her boyfriend. Kyle being the way he was, he did not object.

The problem came when it became a regular thing over the course of the operation. Whenever Kyle and Jessica were alone together, she would ask and he would satisfy. Jessica saw Kyle as nothing more than a high dollar sex doll.

Gregory Mulgrave, however, was not so relaxed in his views. How exactly Gregory found out about the affair, we're unlikely to ever know. However, when he did, his rage at Kyle was explosive. Gregory stopped seeing Kyle as a robot, as he had before then, and now saw him as more of an incubus. He took to saying this at nearly every opportunity. At several points, Kyle and Gregory were in fist fights in the barracks and office. Being that both parties were superhumanly strong, these fist fights were quite destructive.

Gregory was in good standing with Nicholas and several higher-ups. Kyle's only friend in a position of true privilege was Jimmy.

All this backtalk and dehumanization made Kyle begin to feel rather depressed. Plus, he was beginning to be hit with a new feeling; child fever. All these children Kyle was guarding and escorting, whom he had to remain businesslike with, had begun to rub off. He loved these children, and had a tendency to be trusted by them fairly immediately. In spite of his many flaws, Kyle's fatherly nature was always obvious, and is generally considered his best feature by those who knew him. But, he began to change. Kyle began to desperately want a child of his own, to cherish and raise, even as he felt inadequate to do so, seeing how he himself (in his memory) had no childhood, or experience with being raised. And so, Kyle became increasingly depressed.

It was likely for these above reasons that Jimmy pulled a few strings to give Kyle a break. This was also likely spurred on by Emmermann, as Kyle's secret reports had begun to slip. A

transfer was not possible. Emmermann would have never allowed it. However, a change in his life was.

Jimmy presented the new mission to Kyle on his "first birthday," that is, the first anniversary of him awakening in the vat, meaning Christmas Eve, 1984. Therefore, it doubled as a Christmas present.

A further necessary note on the international nature of Project Phoenix. In addition to its recruitments both in and out of itself, Project Phoenix was also prone to loan its assets out to other programs and countries on a temporary basis. These outside programs received huge payments for this. These type of arrangements were the origin of Kyle's next mission.

One of the groups that Project Phoenix did favors for was the secret space program of Chile, under the Pinochet regime. While this regime had fallen out of favor with the United States by the time of Kyle receiving his assignment, this is another case of linear time not being applicable, hence why Kyle was to be sent back in time to 1972 to fulfill one of these contracts. Kyle was, alongside a female Chilean supersoldier, (name not given at the time of the assignment) to protect a dig in the mountains on the Argentine border. Their likely opponents would be Argentine supersoldiers, and possibly some Grays.

Part of the reason for this assignment being considered such a treat was the length- six years, long enough to forget his troubles. Another was the freedom. Kyle was given an apartment in the city of Valparaiso, and a cover as an archaeologist. On the days when the dig was active, Kyle would live on site, but otherwise, he would be left alone in the city, free to do as he pleased,

so long as he didn't draw attention and was diligent about not being photographed. All in all, a magnificent Christmas present.

After receiving his assignment, Kyle returned to his barracks in good spirits, to begin setting up for the Christmas party being held. As all those held in the German barracks, the party was among the best on base. There was a fabulous spread of traditional German Christmas foods, with a bottomless pitcher of mulled wine. Food was ate, drinks were drank, music was played on the red Victrola, trysts were had, and eventually, presents were exchanged.

Kyle received several presents. However the best, and only one he remembers to this day, was from Norma Jean. It was his flight jacket that he'd worn in Okinawa, or one just like it. Norma Jean, in anticipation of Kyle's mission, had switched out the German and Japanese flag patches on the left arm for a Chilean flag patch, so as to blend in. Kyle still counts this as one of the best gifts he has ever received.

Christmas Day was also fairly pleasant, although Kyle was struck with more pangs when he happened to see one of the officers spending time with his son. He wanted that for himself. Kyle made up his mind, when he returned to Camp Hero, to see if there was some sort of arrangement by which he could adopt a child. Kyle didn't know it yet, but he wouldn't have to wait that long.

Kyle left on Boxing Day. He had with him only a duffle bag with some clothes, a glass pad, and the papers necessary for his apartment and his Chilean bank account, as well as a briefcase containing a few thousand dollars' worth of cash in Chilean

Escudos. Kyle was on his own.

Kyle did not leave through the usual portal, the one opened by the chair. Rather, he went through one of Camp Hero's network of permanently open portals, this one above ground, in the area which is outside the time bubble, known as Shadmoor Park. This area was more natural than Camp Hero proper, with more dense woods and a number of hills, most of which had bunkers inside them from the war, all of which are now converted to serve the project.

Kyle was driven in a Land Rover up to and through the portal. This one had no frame on it, and simply stood open to be driven through, to a base in Egypt which was Kyle's first stop. The portal opened into the middle of the desert, setting off to a base.

The base was predominantly an airbase, at least what was visible above ground. It was in the middle of the desert, and consisted mostly of hangars and small buildings, in use by the Egyptian Air Force. Kyle was dropped off at one of the larger planes, an all-black model which bore no insignia, large enough to accommodate a few passengers comfortably.

The side door of the plane was open, with steps ascending, and beside the plane stood a young woman. She was fairly tall, and quite beautiful with light brown skin, long black hair, and big hazel eyes. She was holding a briefcase and a duffle, much like Kyle's.

Kyle alighted and approached the woman.

"My Chilean counterpart, I presume?" Kyle said, in flawless Spanish with a Santiago accent, as was downloaded into his

language chip.

The woman extended her hand to Kyle, obviously impressed.

“Yes. Felizia Muñoz. You must be Señor Dellschau? They didn’t provide a picture,” she said.

Kyle smiled.

Kyle: “They never do, do they? Pleased to meet you. Any idea where we’re headed?”

Felizia: “First we have to pick up our leader and a few artifacts, up near Cairo. Then back to Chile. This plane has a plasma engine, so no refueling stops. We best go. The good doctor isn’t known for her patience.”

And so they boarded the plane.

The journey was extremely short- only a few minutes. This plane, in addition to its plasma engine, could go up to a Mach five speed, and it was only flying to a more northern part of Egypt called Zawyet El Aryan. It’s home to the infamous “secret pyramids,” on the Giza Plateau which had been placed under military control in 1960, with all archaeological work (at least those of the mainstream) banned. As Felizia explained it, the reason was that an access point to the city below the plateau had been found there. That city was their current destination.

The plane landed on a little airstrip directly approaching the “unfinished pyramid.” The plane landed and stopped instantly without at all moving on the runway. Another remarkable design feature.

Kyle and Felizia alighted from the plane, and were met by a group of soldiers in green fatigues, of mixed ethnicity, who had curious patches on their left shoulders- a pair of golden pyra-

mids with silver capstones, in front which were flying comets, leaving tails which snaked to behind the pyramids. This was, as described in Volume One, the symbol of the Giza Intelligence Group. Of course, Kyle no longer knew this, and simply logged the insignia away in his memory banks.

After a retinal scan, the soldiers wordlessly led Kyle and Felizia towards the "unfinished pyramid," which resembled a massive step pyramid, except that only two layers had been built, hence why it was called unfinished. However, once Kyle, Felizia, and the guards escorting them reached the inside, it was obvious that it was in fact a completed two-story building. The structure was all sandstone, and the walls carved all over with hieroglyphs. Kyle looked all around. It took a moment, but then it hit him. This place reminded him of a spaceport or train station. Along one side ran a single long desk, divided into stalls, clearly for lines to form into them. A colonnade ran down the middle, bisecting the building, with a long and narrow walkway between the columns, which themselves formed lanes for lines at the long desk. Of course, there was considerable decay, but the purpose was still quite obvious.

In the middle of the building, two columns had been removed, allowing the installation of a massive industrial elevator descending into the Earth. Kyle, Felizia, and their escorting group approached this elevator, and descended into the planet.

The elevator must have gone down over a mile underground, through the limestone of the plateau. They emerged in the underground city they had been promised. The ceiling looked to

have been at least 500 feet off the ground. The city itself was mostly limestone, at least the little that could be seen, and was mostly composed of low-lying buildings.

One sight, however, was rather shocking. From the ground, rising approximately 300 feet, was a statue of some kind of yeti like creature, intricately and delicately carved from sandstone. Some parts of it still had white paint intact. The monster stood on a massive plinth, at least 12 feet (3.65 meters) in height. Carved on it, in characters taller than Kyle, was an inscription. Kyle and Felizia approached in fascination.

"Can you read it? It looks like Egyptian." Felizia said.

"Similar. It's an Orionite language. Far older than Egyptian," Kyle replied. "The inscription reads 'leviathan' when roughly translated. In a revering tone."

"You're an archaeologist as well as a soldier? My, brains and brawn? How could I resist?" Felizia said.

Kyle chuckled at this flirtation.

"I'm a translation unit, actually. One of my many talents," Kyle said with eyebrows raised.

"I guess being smooth isn't one of them," Felizia replied dryly.

Kyle chuckled, and he and Felizia continued to admire and inspect the statue. Looking around at the city landscape, this statue must have dominated the skyline back in the day.

It was not long before Felizia and Kyle heard footsteps, and turned to see a party of persons approaching, all in dig clothes, save for one smartly dressed short woman with dark hair and unusual amber eyes. Kyle had an odd sense of familiarity over-

come him when he saw her. This was only further fueled by her statement upon reaching Kyle and Felizia.

“You again?” the woman said, making direct eye contact with Kyle. She had a heavy Mississippi drawl.

“Pardon me, but I don’t believe you and I are acquainted,” Kyle bristled.

“Yes we are. But I’m betting you don’t remember a woman if she doesn’t sleep with you,” the woman replied. “Well, since that’s the case, I’m Dr. Ainsley Horton, of the Institute of Investigative Marsology.”

“Still don’t recognize it,” Kyle said. It was true. Kyle’s pre-vat amnesia was still absolute, occasional odd sensations notwithstanding. He shrugged it off, as he had business to do.

“Right. Now, shall we move along?” Felizia said briskly. She was clearly uninterested in Kyle and Dr. Horton’s drama, such as it even was.

Those following Dr. Horton, in their dig clothes, carried a number of large black metal boxes. Painted on the tops in red letters were the words “precious cargo,” in Arabic, Spanish, and English.

“Yes,” Dr. Horton replied, in response to Felizia. She turned to the workers carrying the cases. “Alright boys, let’s get the plane loaded up. Try not to break any more precious artifacts. The Chilean government will not be pleased.”

The workers summarily took the huge boxes up on the elevator in groups. Kyle, Felizia, and Dr. Horton remained near the monstrous statue until the last one returned, and then, at last, they followed. It turned out that a second plane, identical to the

one Kyle and Felizia had arrived on, was waiting. This one was loaded with the "precious cargo" labeled boxes, whilst Kyle, Felizia, and Dr. Horton boarded the other for the flight to Chile.

The flight in these Mach 5 planes lasted only a little over two hours. It passed largely in silence, save for Dr. Horton's complaints of the plane being "unbearably cramped." After the stories Kyle had heard whispers of regarding the cages at Camp Hero, he could feel nothing but contempt for Dr. Horton's complaints.

The moods improved considerably upon landing. They landed in a beautiful mountainous area, with the smell of the sea in the air. Kyle's disposition raised immediately. On the airfield, a veritable armada of Land Rovers was awaiting the arriving party.

Felizia produced a glass pad and began to direct.

"Right. Doctor, you go straight to the dig. Your housing is already there. Señor Dellschau, you're to be taken to your apartment in Valparaiso. I take these artifacts to Santiago."

"I'm coming. They're my artifacts," Dr. Horton said.

"And it's my country, Doctor. And my directive. You'll be reunited with 'your' artifacts soon enough." Felizia said, calmly but very firmly.

As she spoke, a number of men began exiting the Land Rovers, and started unloading the planes. Kyle saw his luggage be thrown into one of these vehicles, and with a shrug, went and climbed into its front seat. Kyle was greeted by a very eager and very young driver.

"Hola. Señor Dellschau? I'm Hector. Apparently I'm to drive

you to your apartment in Valparaiso. Is this your first time in Chile?" The driver said.

Kyle extended his hand.

"Sī. Sure you're old enough to drive?" Kyle joked.

"Fuck you," Hector said good-naturedly. "I suppose we shall take the scenic route?"

"Please. This is my first visit to your fair country. I'd like to see the sites." Kyle said.

"Not sure I can do that in a 30 minute drive. But I'll try." Hector promised.

The pair waited and chatted as the remaining Land Rovers were loaded, then once that was complete, they set off. Kyle enjoyed the drive, which went from the mountainous area north and east of the seaside town of Viña del Mar and on down south into Valparaiso. The scenery and old world charm lifted Kyle's spirits, as did Hector's company. Kyle was beginning to like this country.

The drive, as Hector predicted, took about 30 minutes, until they reached Valparaiso. At this point, they ran into traffic.

"It's Good Friday. I'd forgotten," Hector said apologetically. "Lots of people coming and going."

Kyle shrugged. "Gives me a better look around I suppose, going slowly."

The city was indeed quite attractive- built into the hills overlooking the seaside, with most of the architecture retaining a colonial style. The streets were narrow and winding, and the buildings painted in seemingly all the colors of the rainbow. Shops and restaurants spilled onto the street, creating a lively

scene. The sun was shining fully, tempered by the ocean breeze. People of all sorts walked to and fro, and Kyle being Kyle, found himself eyeing the young ladies.

Hector caught him doing this. “You’ll do well here. You’re tall and light. They won’t be able to get enough of your dick.”

“I hope you’re right about that,” Kyle chuckled, surprised by Hector’s bluntness. He found it rather refreshing.

Eventually, Kyle and Hector reached their first stop, a huge and grand bank in a neighborhood of mansions, luxury car dealerships, and high dollar restaurants.

“Not my neighborhood, I presume?” Kyle said. Hector simply laughed.

Kyle and Hector entered the bank. Kyle was living in Chile under the name Derek Schräder, new immigrant from Argentina. Kyle made sure to speak in a mixed German and Rioplatense Spanish accent, the typical accent of the German community in Argentina. Kyle showed the bank transfer statement he had been issued before leaving Camp Hero to the girl working the desk he and Hector wound up at, and he was immediately accepted. Chilean banks are among the most private and exclusive in the world, perhaps second only to Swiss banks, and aren’t in the habit of asking questions of paying clientele.

The bank itself was quite impressive, a huge, light pink two-story colonial building. The inside, however, was ultramodern, with sleek black marble floors and a single long mahogany desk against one wall. Kyle felt rather out of place, dressed in street clothes as he was. The other clientele were all in suits and

dresses, as were the staff and security. Kyle received a few odd looks. Hector did also, but these were more looks of fear, as Hector was in uniform. An obvious sign of the then still new military dictatorship.

Once Kyle had shown his paperwork to the desk girl, he and Hector were shown into the vaults, to Kyle's safety deposit box. These vaults were underground and maze like, to the point that one wondered how one was supposed to navigate, given that there were no signs of any kind- the floor had no patterns, and the walls were blank.

Aside from several thousand dollars, Kyle's box contained an Argentine passport, a Chilean residency permit, and most surprisingly, a .45 caliber pistol, along with ammunition. The bank worker paid no attention. She was clearly used to seeing such illicit items, and had obviously been instructed to neither be bothered nor to comment. Kyle left the gun and money, but took the passport and other papers, at Hector's behest. Kyle would be needing these to register at his new dwellings.

It was to these dwellings that Kyle and Hector went next. As Kyle had predicted, these were not in the same fancy neighborhood as the bank, but in a much older and less affluent area, with a great preponderance of narrow cobblestone streets. The buildings were mostly two-story affairs that had fallen into varying levels of decay, although none of them seemed uninhabitable.

It was on one of these streets that Kyle and Hector stopped, in front of a two-story old building. The bottom six feet were of stone, and the rest was a light red stucco. The building had five

doors onto the street. Four were red, and the last one green. Kyle surmised that these must be the doors to the apartments. From the green door, an elderly lady came bolting as soon as Kyle and Hector began unloading from the car.

“Señor Schräder? My new tenant?” she said excitedly, of course all in Spanish.

“Sī,” Kyle replied with a smile. He was unaware that anyone had prearranged his living, and had assumed that he would have to negotiate for a vacant apartment. But as usual, all had been considered. Kyle wondered if he would ever get used to this.

The old lady continued; “I’m Señora Marquez. Your new landlady. No parties, keep your women quiet, and no overnight guests on Sundays. We gonna have problems?”

“No. I like a woman who knows what she wants,” Kyle replied with a grin.

“Ay dios mío,” Señora Marquez muttered, before continuing. “I foresee no problems. Let’s get to business.”

And so she, Kyle, and Hector entered into the green-doored apartment, to a desk near the door. This small room was all to speak of as regards a ground floor. A narrow staircase led up to the apartment itself. At the bottom of the room was a small desk, with chairs on either side. Señora Marquez sat on one side, and gestured for Kyle to he seated on the other. Kyle signed his lease and received his key, and soon enough, was being shown to his own apartment.

The flat was quite adequate, although it was very old. The wooden floors creaked a great deal, and there was no air condi-

tioning. However, it was fully furnished, and the cream colored walls were spotless. It had a single bedroom and bathroom, off the living room. The living room window was the only one, however it was large and had a window seat which Kyle would grow fond of using to write songs in. All in all, for the very low price, it was quite a satisfactory home.

Kyle had only the one duffle bag of clothes he had been issued, so settling in was no problem. Señora Marquez insisted on showing pictures of her grand nieces to Kyle, not that he objected. Hector then left, leaving behind a phone number, and Kyle was alone.

By this point, it was mid evening, and Kyle decided to go out. The restaurants in this neighborhood were all quite full, as it was Good Friday, and everyone was eating out with their out-of-town relatives. Kyle settled into a small Brazilian restaurant just a few blocks from his apartment, and had a very nice steak and Caipirinha. Just because he had no metabolism didn't mean he couldn't enjoy the finer things. Beginning to settle into the country now, he returned satisfied to his new apartment. As a courtesy to Señora Marquez, he resisted the urge to bring a woman home on his first night. It seemed poor form.

The remainder of his weekend passed in largely the same way. He spent his time walking around and acquainting himself with the area of Valparaiso he was living in. He had no car, and wasn't inclined to dial the number given to him by Hector. He had the sense that it wasn't for use in non-essential circumstances. And so, the weekend passed quite pleasantly, if slowly. Kyle felt rested on Monday, when the telephone in the

apartment rang.

Kyle picked up the receiver.

“Good morning. Schräder residence,” Kyle answered in Spanish.

“Line is secure, Kyle.” Felizia’s voice.

Kyle: “Pleased to finally hear from you. What happens next?”

Felizia: “Gather a change of clothing. Mountain appropriate. Bring your gun and glass pad. You’ll be needing them.”

Kyle: “I don’t have a gun.”

“You didn’t get the one left for you at the bank? Oh well. One will be issued at the site. Get your ass in gear.” And with that, Felizia simply hung up.

“The nerve of that girl,” Kyle chuckled.

Kyle gathered a small bag with the requisite clothing, making sure to bring his favorite flight jacket. He then marshaled himself down the stairs to await being picked up. Kyle didn’t have to wait long before a Land Rover pulled up, driven by Hector once again. They had a pleasant, if very long, drive of about five hours to the south and east, to the Andes along the Argentine border.

Kyle was impressed by the scenery upon exiting the urban sprawl. This was real, raw nature, interspersed with the occasional farm or vineyard. The altitude also began to rise. Kyle was unaffected, however he saw that Hector was showing signs of altitude sickness. Kyle considered offering to take the wheel, but it seemed rude somehow. And so they drove for a long distance, the last two hours of which were on all dirt roads going deep into the forest.

Eventually, they were deep in the mountains, and the forest so thick that Kyle and Hector had to drive slowly to avoid ramming into any trees.

How had they ever brought archaeological equipment out here? Kyle wondered.

Eventually, the pair reached a large clearing, a slight distance up a mountain. In it were parked a number of trailers, between which various personnel were milling about. Felizia was among them, and approached the Land Rover carrying Kyle and Hector.

“About goddamn time you two showed up,” Felizia said irritatedly.

“I thought we made good time,” Hector said cheerfully. “And you seem to all be doing fine. Stop bitching.”

“I’m not the one bitching. That honor goes to the good doctor.” Felizia said with an eye roll. “They found a chamber. We contractually can’t enter without security present.”

“Which means us,” Kyle interjected briskly, exiting the Land Rover. “Where’s my gun?”

“That’s the spirit, I suppose. Follow me.” Felizia sighed.

The three walked to one of the trailers, all of which were labeled with handy paper signs about three feet by four feet. The trailer that the trio walked to was labeled “armory.” It had a large metal design, painted in a pale magenta color, which somehow seemed incongruous. The side door of the trailer was open, and a man stood in the frame, handing out weapons.

“For three, please,” Felizia said, as though she was requesting a table at a restaurant. The guns were issued. They appeared

to be a standard Uzi and Browning Hi-Power. However, an examination revealed that in fact, they were modified to fire special, ultra high velocity bullets with sharp tips, made to shred armor like toilet paper. Kyle winced, remembering the similar bullet that he had been shot with accidentally by Danny.

The group proceeded to the dig, which, it turned out, was deep underground. It was entered through a tunnel in the side of the mountain which looked like an innocuous cave. At the end of the winding cave was a large round room, obviously carved from the dark brown rock. In the center was a shaft, into which a huge cage elevator descended. The trio entered it and went down.

They were met at the bottom by something rather shocking, at least to Kyle. This site was a near perfect mirror of the site in Egypt, hence why the two digs had been merged.

“Holy shit,” Kyle muttered at the revelation.

“Quite. Now you see why all the diplomatic fuss,” Felizia said.

Seated near the elevator were Dr. Horton and her crew, as well as a number of other soldiers.

“About time you all showed up. We’ve found what we believe to be a tomb complex. But we can’t enter without you meat-heads present.” Dr. Horton said.

“Welcoming and friendly as ever, Doctor,” Kyle said evenly. “Let’s do proceed, lest you should go insane from waiting any longer.”

Dr. Horton gave him what is often described as “a narrow look,” before turning on her heel and marching resolutely in

the direction of the spot.

They marched through the narrow, winding streets of the underground city for what must have been over a mile, before reaching the wall that made up the edge. The wall was festooned with glyphs of all types, once again in the Egyptian-esque Orionite language as in the Egypt site. Kyle resisted the urge to begin speaking aloud the translations, replacing it with a stronger urge to watch Dr. Horton struggling to translate.

The destination that they had marched to was a massive set of double doors, set just a few inches into the wall. The doors were of the same stone as the walls, and only distinguishable by their belt set a few inches in, as well as a slight seam between them. On the doors was etched a relief of what appeared to be a Gray type alien lying in a sarcophagus.

A few tables of equipment had been set up near the door, and Dr. Horton began to speak.

“We are going to cut away this door, using a laser. We have already made all the requisite scans and rubbings. We must enter the chamber beyond now.” Dr. Horton said.

A laser was produced. It looked more like a spotlight on a tripod, however what came out was a laser. Kyle winced as it began cutting the stone of the doors. However, it ceased almost as soon as it had begun. It had cut only a few inches into the door when the doors began to spontaneously open.

“Turn the laser off! We don’t know what you might hit!” Dr. Horton barked. The laser was switched off.

Beyond the opened doors, a vast hall could be seen. The walls and even ceiling were lined with stone sarcophagi, all

containing small Gray type aliens, about four feet tall. The sarcophagi were sealed by small force fields, and apparently had some sort of gravity plating, as even those on the ceiling were laid perfectly flatly.

From beneath her coat, Dr. Horton withdrew a small camera, and rushed into the chamber, snapping photos and talking excitedly. Kyle and several other soldiers, including Felizia, followed.

It wasn't but a minute or so before it all went wrong. A force field went up in front of the door, locking Dr. Horton and the soldiers inside. As it went up, the force fields on the sarcophagi began to turn off, and the inhabitants began to emerge. These weren't sarcophagi at all, but stasis chambers. Within seconds, everyone in the room except Kyle was possessed of a crushing headache. All began to collapse.

Kyle immediately realized what was happening. He raised his uzi and began opening fire, mowing down the small Grays. With his built-in capabilities, he was capable of using only a single bullet on each one, and sometimes less, when they lined up. These Grays were not exactly physically strong, and so only a single bullet was needed for each one anyway. All of this took place in far less time than it takes to describe, and it was no more than three minutes after entering the room that all the emergent Grays were dead, and the psychic attack they were carrying out ended. The security system seemed to end with it, as the door was unblocked.

Kyle, being synthetic, had been immune to this attack. It was after this attack that the other soldiers began to respect Kyle.

Even Dr. Horton softened, to a very slight degree. It was the slight beginning of a relationship of, if not friendship, at least a modicum of respect.

I could, perhaps, describe in detail Kyle's Chilean experience going forward. However, as it's the third archaeological dig in this book, I will refrain. Kyle did fall in love with the country, and particularly the city of Valparaiso, where he lived all weekends. His allowance never ran dry, and he lived frugally. Kyle and Felizia, beginning in 1976, did begin sleeping with each other, however there was no real emotion attached. They were simply soldiers fulfilling a need.

A change occurred in January of 1978. Kyle was on one of his days off, sitting in his apartment, enjoying a bottle of Limoncello, when his glass pad began buzzing. Surprised, he picked it up. An incoming call from Europa, registered to Georg Nimmer. He immediately answered, greeted by Georg's face on the screen, who was in the front of a truck.

Kyle: "Georg! Good to see you! What prompts you to call?"

Georg; "Hello Kyle. Good to see you my friend. Not a social call I'm afraid. I have a…… package delivery for you. At Camp Hero. You'll need to return. A car is on its way to pick you up. You should be back in Chile in a few hours, but it's urgent."

Kyle: "Very well, I suppose. What's this all about?"

Georg: "I think it's better if you just see it. Won't be long."

And so Kyle hurriedly dressed, and was picked up by a Land Rover with a very taciturn female driver he didn't recognize. They drove to the airfield Kyle had first arrived in Chile at. They were met by a triangular craft, each side about 20 feet long. Kyle

boarded alone, and the ship “jumped” to, as the onboard voice explained, Camp Hero in January 1985. That was all Kyle was told. However, he somehow knew things were about to change.

**Author’s note. A significant chapter. However, what’s to follow will be even more so. **

Chapter 11

Kyle exited the craft, his confusion continuously on the rise. This was all feeling increasingly questionable. What Kyle was unaware of at the time was that a plan was being carried out, far away from either Camp Hero or Chile.

Emmermann had a grandson, by the name of Maximilian Alexander "Max" Bronsley, the son of Alexander Bronsley and Melanie Bronsley, née Dupree. Alexander Bronsley was Emmermann's son, though oblivious to Emmermann's existence. His story should be somewhat familiar to my followers, and while fascinating, is certainly beyond the scale of this book.

Maximilian Bronsley was born at what is generally agreed to have been Area 51, on July 8th, 1978. The first eight years of life he spent not only in Area 51, but also London, Hong Kong, and Mars. Max was possessed of many psychic abilities, and was exceptionally smart, both due to his natural lineage, and to the gene therapy applied to him in the womb.

It was for these reasons that Emmermann, after observing little Max from afar, decided to bring him into the fold, and put him in Kyle's care at Camp Hero, ideally, to become the third in succession to inherit the Emmermann family's mysterious empire.

How the entire situation went down, we may never know. What we do know is that Emmermann made some form of

contact with Melanie Bronsley, and by some method convinced her that turning her baby over was the best course of action, and that he would assist her into hiding. Emmermann chose Georg to carry out the extraction. Nothing but the best, even for a simple extraction.

The extraction occurred on August 4th, 1986. It was very simple. The Bronsley family were on Europa on business of Area 51. For their time there, they were forced to live in a tiny single bedroom apartment. On that particular night, Alexander Bronsley was possessed of a nasty head cold, and so he slept in the bedroom alone, while Melanie and Max slept in the living room. The hour came, and Melanie quietly bundled Max up and exited the apartment, into the waiting armored levitating truck driven by Georg, which drove to and through a portal at the edge of the colony, to 1985 Camp Hero.

Kyle arrived a few minutes before the armored truck. The ship dropped him at the same landing pad where had first set foot at Camp Hero, on Walpurgisnacht of 1984. He stood on the landing pad waiting, his unease and suspicion growing. Kyle had waited only a few minutes when the truck arrived. It looked like a typical armored truck, of the kind used to move shipments between banks. However, it was unmarked, and levitated on an antigravity plate, rather than rode on wheels, as typical of off-planet vehicles.

Kyle approached the backing up truck, and rushed to the cab. Georg sat in the driver's seat.

"Hello Kyle. I need you to sign this, please." Georg said.

Georg produced a glass pad, on whose screen was a dotted

line. With a shrug, Kyle signed it with his finger, then looked up at Georg.

“My old friend. What the fuck is this all about?” Kyle demanded.

Georg sighed. “Kyle. I wish I could fully answer. Suffice to say, you have responsibilities now. Major ones. Go to the back of the truck. You’ll see.”

Kyle did so. A few seconds later, the backdoor of the truck opened. A young boy of perhaps eight years old sat in the back, along with a young woman. The woman was obviously a Nordic alien hybrid, with long limbs, whitish blonde hair, and baby blue eyes, larger than most biological humans.

The boy was also a beautiful child. He looked rather like a painting. His eyes and chin were the same as that of the woman in the truck, but his jaw was more square, and his hair was medium brown. They both carried bags, his a black backpack, and the woman’s a large duffle bag.

The boy bounded out of the truck, and the woman remained. She and Kyle made eye contact. A message passed between them in that moment, not spoken, but not quite telepathic either. From her side, the message was that Kyle, for his own safety, had better take nothing but the best care of her baby. From Kyle’s side, it was a solemn and absolute assurance that he would do nothing else, on pain of death. And he meant it.

The woman tapped the wall of the truck. The back door closed, and the truck took off again, leaving Kyle and the boy alone on the landing pad. Kyle turned to him, and finally spoke.

“My boy, what is your name?” Kyle asked. It seemed the

appropriate thing to ask.

“My name is Maximilian Alexander Bronsley. Please call me Max. Are you Kyle Dellschau? I was told I was being delivered to you,” the boy said, seemingly snapping out of a daze. “I suppose I’m in your care now.”

“Yes,” Kyle replied. And then, fighting back tears, he fell to a knee and took the young boy into his arms. Kyle had never felt such strong love as he did now, for this lost little boy, and had no thoughts in his mind beyond that he would do anything and everything for him. And then another thought; he was on his own. Kyle was now, in effect, a single father, and had only the slightest idea what to do.

Max reciprocated the hug after a few moments, and man and boy were left on the landing pad in that position for several minutes.

Eventually, Kyle had regained control of his emotions, and backed up to face young Max eye-to-eye.

“Right. Mi Pequeño, is there anything you need?” Kyle asked, and without waiting for an answer, slipped off the boy’s back-pack and began inspecting it.

Max smiled ever so slightly. “I’d like to be home, but my mother says that’s not an option, and that I’m to think of you as my new father. I suppose you’re off to a good start.”

“You may think of me as whatever makes you happy, Max. I will need a lot of coaching on this child rearing thing though,” Kyle said with a grin.

“I’m hardly a child in that sense. But I’ll do my best Kyle. Is my bag adequate?” Max said facetiously.

Kyle had been searching it. He found a few documents to allow Max to live in Chile, as well as a change of clothing, and about a dozen photographs. For Max to remember the life he'd left behind, Kyle realized with a shiver. This was permanent.

"Max, can you board the ship and wait for me? I need to go pick something up," Kyle said. And so Max boarded the still waiting triangle craft. Kyle was true to his word. He merely went to his locker to retrieve Lola, his guitar, and then returned to the ship, where Max was waiting.

The trip back to Chile was as fast and uneventful as the trip to Camp Hero had been. Kyle and Max talked a bit, trying to give each other a basic idea of each other's lives and personalities. Max said he liked grape Jolly Ranchers and listened to Cantonese music. He loved Hong Kong and London, and was already able to speak French, Russian, German, Cantonese, and enough Spanish that he'd survive this mission. Kyle suggested that Max's cover could be that he was Kyle's obscure cousin, come to live with him after the death of his parents.

They reached Kyle's apartment fairly quickly. The drive was short, as it was a very slow, languid summer Wednesday in Valparaiso- almost no traffic. It was midafternoon when the Land Rover dropped them off. No more than two hours had passed since Kyle had received word from Georg, and in that tiny amount of time, his life had changed massively.

Kyle and Max spent the rest of that day trying to get to know each other. They had some success. Max clearly trusted Kyle a great deal, and saw something in him that Kyle was unable to see in himself. Kyle found Max very amusing, in addition to

being as endearing as he was. Even at this young age, Max already cursed like a sailor, and was very knowledgeable about many things. However, Kyle was still struck with confusion. He wasn't sure what to do. Kyle had never been with a child in such a normal setting, where the child needed not so much protection as he needed care.

Kyle's help came the next day, from an unexpected source; his landlady, Señora Marquez. Realizing that he might need to change his lease, Kyle had gone to her apartment to discuss it.

"Of course he may stay. Do you have any clue what you are doing?" Señora Marquez asked pointedly.

Kyle put aside his macho urges and chose to simply admit it.

"No," Kyle said with a resigned chuckle. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

"I thought not. Well, I raised three of my own, and only one of them has ever been arrested." Señora Marquez said with a smile, and then set towards Kyle's apartment. Kyle smiled to himself. This woman intimidated him many times more than anything he'd faced on the battlefield.

Señora Marquez immediately began to shake her head at Kyle's apartment upon entry. While it was clean, it was still undoubtedly the apartment of a single man. Alcohol and porn magazines had both been left out for all to see and partake in. Kyle was deeply embarrassed, particularly at the magazines. The Señora was however polite enough to not comment on them, aside from putting them on a high shelf out of Max's reach.

Kyle suddenly had a rather shocking idea, and turned and

rushed to his bedroom to put away his gun and glass pad. Kyle knew he'd be in considerable trouble if those were seen by a civilian. Max came rushing in to assist him, clearly having the same idea.

"Scary, isn't she?" Max said. Kyle nodded and suppressed a laugh.

Señora Marquez went through the entire apartment, "setting Kyle straight." She gave Kyle many tips on ways to keep Max occupied, proper bedtimes, and proper behavior. The Señora more or less ordered Kyle to clean up his language, stop keeping such late hours, and to stop bringing home quite so many women. She made a point of telling Kyle to begin putting the toilet seat down, so Max would also have that habit when he grew. She also insisted on bringing a cot from her own apartment and setting it up in Kyle's living room, as she insisted that they both sleep in beds, rather than Kyle on the couch and Max on the bed, as was the previous arrangement.

Kyle was very grateful to the Señora for her advice, and was relieved when she said his rent would not be raised. She found Max adorable, and was happy about his presence.

Once the cot was brought over, Kyle received one final tip; find things to entertain Max.

In Señora Marquez's words; "A boy's hands, when unoccupied, are a playground for the devil."

As it would turn out, Kyle was not called to the dig until the following Monday. Kyle and Max spent the time relaxing, and getting to know each other. Kyle learned to be happy and to laugh as he perhaps never had, and Max learned to enjoy the

finer things. Kyle took Max to gourmet restaurants and the beach, and had to stop himself from constantly spoiling the boy, who had filled his deepest wish at that point, of having a child of his own to protect and cherish.

Max, for his part, was learning to adapt to his new caretaker. In discussions since, Max has stated that he feared that Kyle would be a cold and lifeless military figure, who protected him only because it was his job. When Max saw that he was loved, he began to feel calmer about, and even a bit happy with his new life.

The following Monday, Kyle was picked up for the dig. Feeling there were no other options, he brought Max with him. There seemed no danger at the time; the incident with the Grays awakening from the stasis pods had been the only instance of combat in nearly six years.

Kyle's job at the dig had mostly consisted of sitting by doors and carrying heavy boxes. However, he was not bored. He'd learned to occupy himself by sitting and writing, usually poetry, and had also taken to sketching the people and scenes around him, as well as ones he'd seen in the past. Now he spent this down time training Max and teaching him things, such as how to play the guitar. Max was quite popular at the dig. In many ways, he was just like the workers, and even the academics got along with him. At one point Felizia, upon seeing that Kyle and Max had only a deck of cards with which to play, bestowed them with a chess set and took it upon herself to teach Kyle and Max how to play.

This isn't to say there weren't problems; there were. A

number of arguments were had over what was suitable for young ears, to which Max would always pipe in with something to the effect of; “Do I get a say in this?”

This would invariably receive him a “Shut up kid,” from Kyle. Sometimes this would lead to an argument, and sometimes to a laugh. It all depended on the mood.

Dr. Horton disliked Max’s presence, and would always make a fuss when he was at the dig site proper. Her protestations were mostly ignored, however, save for Kyle sometimes sending Max away to avoid an uproar.

Things began to sour for the dig later that year, which was 1978. This was due to the Beagle Conflict occurring between Chile and Argentina. Unilateral relations were failing, and the possibility of open warfare was on the horizon. Being almost directly on the border between the two countries, the dig was at risk. This was not helped by the fact that while patrolling on the surface, several security personnel had seen an increased presence of spy helicopters in the sky, of Argentine origin. It was only a matter of time before the dig was spotted and possibly raided by Argentine supersoldiers.

For this reason, the security presence at the dig began to increase, and one day, in what was likely April of 1978, the dig received a very significant visitation. It was early in the afternoon, and everyone was milling about in the dig, doing their usual business, when Dr. Horton began marching around with a megaphone, ordering everyone to “line up near the elevator and stand up looking sharp, because they had a very important visitor.” Everyone hurriedly rushed to obey, instinctively

knowing she was not exaggerating this time.

A short few minutes later, the elevator descended into the dig site, and a large group of occupants emerged, who filled the elevator to its capacity. All were Chilean military men. Most wore the uniforms of generals, commanders, etcetera, save for a few in smartsuits who were obviously supersoldiers brought along for security, as they towered over their non-enhanced commanders.

In the center of the group stood a single general- large, dark, and leaking evil. The others in the bunch stood apart from him. Some would say out of respect, but to Kyle, it was obvious that it was out of the central man's off-putting energy. The man was, of course, then-president (and right wing dictator) of Chile, Augusto Pinochet.

Everyone stood and watched and listened as Pinochet, striding back and forth like a drill sergeant, laid out the current situation. Kyle largely tuned out what was said. However, it was explained, amid the propaganda, that the dig had three weeks to go. At that point, it was to be sealed, in anticipation of a possible Argentine invasion.

The following three weeks were frenetic. Dr. Horton became more tyrannical than ever, and would fly into a loud panic if the slightest thing went wrong. Kyle, Felizia, and the other soldiers began increasing their patrols on the surface more, eyeing any possible ambushes. None came, which in a way, served only to increase the tension.

An unexpected escalation occurred on the final week. Kyle and Max were packing their bags for their final trip from the

apartment to the dig, for the final five days, at which point they'd be returning to Camp Hero.

Kyle was in his bedroom, packing his bags, while Max was packing up his own things that he'd accumulated over his six months Chile, which was mostly just the clothes Kyle had bought him, as well as a few books donated by Señora Marquez.

Kyle heard a distinctive crash, followed by a frustrated "Oh shit!" from Max.

Kyle: "You alright in there Kid?"

Max: "I'm fine. I dropped my fucking chess set."

Kyle: "Alright. Pick it up and put it in your bag. And watch your language!"

Max: "Jawohl, mein Kommandant!"

It was not three minutes later that Kyle heard a telepathic transmission from Max, who was standing in the bedroom doorway.

"Turn around and look, but whatever you do, don't speak."

Kyle did so, and saw that Max was standing in the doorway, holding in his hand a broken black rook chess piece. At first glance, it seemed innocuous. Then Kyle saw it- a tiny red blinking light. A bug.

Kyle gently took the bugged chess piece from Max's hand and paused, considering what to do. A telepathic exchange occurred between them.

Max: "I learned about these things in my life before you knew me. This bug is Russian made."

Kyle. "What do we do with it?"

Max: "This."

Max took the bug back out of Kyle's hand, threw it on the wooden floor, and jumped on it, landing on one foot. Then without another word, Max picked up the pieces, marched to the toilet and flushed them before returning to Kyle to continue their telepathic exchange.

Kyle: "Well……. Shit! Shit, shit, shit!"

Max: "Indeed. So what now?"

Kyle: "We have to get to Felizia."

Max: "Why is Felizia relevant?"

Kyle: "Don't you understand? That chess set came from her house! She gave it to you! It was meant to bug her! Grab your things, we leave in three minutes or less."

With that, Max simply nodded, and within three minutes, he and Kyle were both ready to leave the apartment and Chile permanently.

Kyle hurriedly wrote the following note for Señora Marquez and placed it on the door with a thumbtack.

"Many thanks for your help and kindness over the years. Max and I have to leave unexpectedly. We're not expected to return. You'll find this month's rent in the credenza drawer. Feel free to sell what we leave behind and enjoy the money.

Kindest regards and good luck.

Derek Schräder."

With their packs and a briefcase of cash, Kyle and Max then rushed out onto the street. Kyle flagged down the nearest taxi, and gave Felizia's address in Santiago. The driver raised his eyebrows at this.

"That's a long drive, Pendejo. Going to cost a lot." the driver

said.

Kyle flashed his briefcase of cash. “I think I can cover the fucking cost. Will you do it?”

“Hop in,” the driver said with a smile, and so Kyle and Max did.

With Kyle’s badgering, plus promises of more money, they were able to cut about 1/3rd of their travel time, so that they reached Felizia’s apartment in just over an hour.

Kyle knew Felizia’s address only through pillow talk. It was his first time actually visiting. It turned out that Felizia lived very nicely, in a stately old Spanish colonial building, in a neighborhood which, judging by the many different flags that were flown from the various homes and buildings, must be some sort of unofficial diplomatic compound.

He tucked his pistol into his waistband surreptitiously, paid the driver, and alighted from the car with Max. Somehow sensing danger, he pulled Max behind a tree and handed him the gun, ensuring Max tucked it away. He knew how to use it. Kyle had made sure of that. And Kyle was confident that he needed an actual armament less than Max did. At last, they approached the building.

The building was no less grand on the inside than out. It seemed rather more like an intimate luxury hotel than an apartment building. At the moment Kyle and Max entered, the desk was unmanned, and there were no barriers blocking them from going up the red carpeted mahogany stairs which ascended beside them. Up they went.

Felizia’s apartment was 307, on the penultimate floor. The

halls were all white, with wooden floors that had a narrow strip of red carpet down the middle. Again, it was like a five-star hotel.

The door to Felizia's apartment stood about an inch ajar already. Kyle knocked; no response.

"Wait here, remember the gun, and try not to use it," Kyle said to Max, and he slowly entered the apartment. He did a sweep of the rooms. No Felizia. And indeed, no one at all. There was no luggage, and much of the clothing was gone, so Kyle felt it was safe to assume Felizia had left and no one would be coming into in this apartment. He pulled Max inside.

Kyle: "Kid, do you know how to search a residence?"

Max: "Yes."

Kyle "Good. I spotted a payphone on the street outside. I'm going to make a call. Be back in three minutes. If the cleaning lady shows up, tell her you're Felizia's nephew or something. Understood?"

Max: "Loud and clear."

Already they were working and communicating like partners.

Kyle went to the payphone outside the building and called the number Hector had left him with, at the beginning of his time in Chile. He'd never used it until now.

"Hello?" Hector's voice.

"Hector, it's Kyle. Has Felizia been picked up yet? Or does she drive herself?" Kyle hadn't realized that he did not know the answer to this.

"Someone went to pick her up. She was gone. We're searching for her now. What's going on?" Hector asked, his voice

clearly alarmed.

“I don’t trust this line. Get to her apartment as soon as possible Hector. Something very strange is going on.” Kyle urged.

“I’ll be there in 15 minutes. Over and out.” Hector said.

Kyle then returned to the apartment. Max was searching it, as directed. Kyle joined in. For a bit, they found nothing atypical of a Latin woman her age, though Kyle winced at her meager food supply. Nearly all her meals must be from outside her house.

The first real hint at confirming the sneaking suspicion Kyle already had was found in Felizia’s wastebasket. A bunch of wrappers of Russian chocolate bars. With all of the anti-Soviet sanctions in place in Chile at the time, they must have cost a fortune, which raised Kyle’s suspicion further.

Within moments of this discovery, Max’s voice echoed from the bedroom, saying; “Kyle. I found her diary. It’s in Russian. And I’m not liking what I’m reading.”

Kyle rushed to the bedroom and took the diary from Max’s hands. Max’s assessment was correct. Felizia’s diary entries confirmed Kyle’s intuition. Felizia was not the victim of a Russian spy. She was a Russian spy.

“Fuck!” Kyle screamed, throwing the diary to the ornate carpeted floor.

“Was it something I said?” Max asked.

Kyle couldn’t quite tell if he was serious. He pulled Max close.

“No. Mi pequeño, no. It’s just… Goddamn it, I trusted her.” Kyle said regretfully.

“I gathered that, Kyle. No need to get all touchy,” Max said with a snicker as he pulled away from Kyle.

Soon enough, Hector arrived. The three searched Felizia’s apartment. They found nothing else incriminating. However, they felt safe in their conclusion; Felizia was a Soviet spy, and had, upon Max’s discovery of the bug, absconded in a hurry. Eventually, feeling powerless, they piled into Hector’s Land Rover, which had a car phone. Hector called around and called off the search party. Then, resignedly, they set off for the dig.

They were a number of hours late arriving of course, and received a wringing out by Dr. Horton. Kyle and Hector quietly assembled all the security staff and soldiers and had a recorded meeting about the Felizia situation. It was decided that they’d all file reports and hope for the best at the end of the mission. There was no doubt they’d all be questioned, however, they thought that since there were only four days left, they may as well press on.

The remaining four days passed without incident, save for Dr. Horton’s outrage once she was informed of Felizia’s duplicity. Kyle was very relieved when, at last, the trucks were loaded and were all jetting off to the airfield from which he had first arrived.

It was as they were driving to the airfield that Kyle chose to write a song. He meant it for Felizia. While the deeply romantic lyrics are hardly representative of his feelings, it would also have felt odd to not write a song. Felizia had made a lasting impression, if for no other reason than teaching Kyle a lesson on paying attention and not thinking with his crotch.

The song was as follows:

Hasta que me olvides, voy a intentarlo
No habrá quién me seque tus labios por dentre y por fuera
No habrá quién desnude mi nombre una tarde cualquiera

Hasta que me olvides tanto que
No exista mañana ni después, no no

Hasta que me olvides, voy a intentarlo
No habrá quién desnude mi boca como tu sonrisa
Y voy a rodar como lágrima entre la llovizna

Hasta que me olvides tanto que
No exista mañana ni después

Hasta que me olvides
Voy a amarte tanto, tanto
Como fuego entre tus brazos
Hasta que me olvides

Hasta que me olvides
Y me ropa en mil pedazos
Continuar me gran teatro
Hasta que me olvides

Hasta que me olvides
Y voy a bordar tu sueño en la almohada

Llenar poco a poco el silencio con tu abencedario
Y cuando me callé por dentro, tenerte a mi lado

Hasta que me olvides tanto que
No exista mañana ni después

Hasta que me olvides
Voy a amarte tanto, tanto
Como fuego entre tus brazos
Hasta que me olvides

Hasta que me olvides
Y me ropa en mil pedazos
Continuar mi gran teatro
Hasta que me olvides
Hasta que me olvides, oh oh

Voy a continuar copiando
Tu cuerpo sobre la pared
Y voy a colgar tu pecho
La noche y el amanecer

Hasta que me olvides
Voy a amarte tanto, tanto
Como fuego entre tus brazos
Hasta que me olvides

Hasta que me olvides

Y me ropa en mil pedazos
Continuar me gran teatro
Hasta que me olvides

Hasta que me olvides

Eventually, everyone was standing at the airfield, where a group of roughly 10 triangle craft was waiting. Kyle stood around and saw that the artifacts were all safely loaded on, along with the many personnel, both soldiers and archaeologists. As the last ship was loading, Kyle, along with Max, found themselves standing next to Dr. Horton.

Dr. Horton turned to Kyle as they stood on the pavement and spoke.

Dr. Horton: “I hope someday I can forgive you for letting a Soviet spy run loose on my dig.”

Kyle: “Forgive me?”

Dr. Horton: “Well, we all know you were the one sleeping with her. But as I said, I hope I can forgive you eventually. You’re not the first man to think with your crotch.”

Kyle took off his aviators so as to have direct eye contact with Dr. Horton.

Kyle: “Doctor, your spirit is admirable in a way. And you’re an outstanding archaeologist. And I also mean it from the bottom of my heart when I say; I hope I never see you or hear your name again.”

Leaving Dr. Horton in slightly flustered silence, he took Max’s hand and turned towards the last craft remaining,

without personnel.

“Come on Kid. This one must be ours. Long Island is calling us back.” Kyle said.

And so, Kyle and Max said goodbye to Chile. Kyle had a new worry now- raising Max, using the things he had learned, except now in a much more hostile and difficult environment. Kyle didn’t know quite what he was going to do. However there was one thing he was determined, on pain of death, that he was not going to do; fail.

Author’s note. A very emotional chapter indeed, at least for myself. The most emotional so far across the two volumes. I hope it was enjoyable for the reader. The song of Kyle’s recounted here, “Hasta Que Me Olvides,” comes highly recommended on my part, and is easily findable. I feel the need to add that, to me, Felizia’s revelation as a Russian spy reeks of a frame job. However, we are unlikely to ever know for certain.

Chapter 12

If Kyle had been expecting a respite after his and Max's return from Chile, he was definitely disappointed. Immediately upon arrival, Kyle and Max were thrust into Camp Hero's bureaucracy and administration.

Kyle had expected that Max's registration and housing would be simple, like his own had been. This didn't turn out to be the case. Unlike Kyle, Max's arrival had not been anticipated or accounted for, so no housing was prepared. Fortunately, Kyle and Max had arrived within moments after Camp Hero woke up for the day, which gave them 14 hours to sort the situation out. And so they did.

Once Max was turned away from the German barracks, the Commandant said that they had two choices; either Kyle could turn Max in at Battery 113, where he'd be looked after, or they could attempt to sort it out bureaucratically. Kyle, like most people at Camp Hero, was not allowed access to Battery 113. However, he knew the rumors and the things told to him by several of the children he'd guarded, such as it being the home of cages and violent abuses. Kyle had no intention of taking Max to such a place, so red tape it was.

Kyle and Max spent approximately the next 11 hours in a bewildering bunch of offices, all around Camp Hero, signing this and that paper, putting in calls to Emmermann himself,

and at least one time, offering a bribe to an officer by the name of Adelaide Dupree, who seemed to have Nicholas's approval.

Eventually, Jimmy heard of what was going on, and saved Kyle and Max by simply signing a directive that Max was to be housed in the German single men's barracks. Kyle was grateful for this of course, though found himself frustrated for not thinking of appealing to Jimmy to begin with. But, fairly quickly, Max was settled, in the bunk directly below Kyle's, and with his own locker.

By this point, which was early 1985, Kyle began to receive increased pressure from Emmermann. The reports he was supposed to be uploading on the conditions leading to the supposed "regime change" had become few and far between. Only a few days after arriving with Max, he received a new gift from Emmermann, found in his locker- a Leica M6 35MM. Finest camera ever made. The return address on the cardboard box was Emmermann's Centurion estate, making the sender unambiguous.

The camera came with a single note; "Find a photographer."

Kyle chuckled. The meaning was fairly obvious; find someone to take pictures of Camp Hero life for Emmermann's secret cause. Now all he had to do was follow this order. Only problem being, Kyle had never tried to recruit a spy before. But with a sigh and shrug, he accepted.

With these new factors, Kyle's life increased in complexity. He was soon confronted with the reality that Max must work, and must find a good job, if Max was to live a decent life in Project Phoenix. Any ideas he may have had of his charge living

a sheltered life ceased to exist. He needed to find Max a job and a purpose. After a brief conversation with Jimmy, just two days after returning from Chile, the process had begun.

Max was led from the barracks by a young girl Kyle didn't recognize, for a series of tests. Kyle was left unoccupied. He tried returning to his desk, but after several hours and no assignment received, he decided to get up and see his friends. He didn't have many.

As it turned out, most of Kyle's friends were otherwise occupied. Norma Jean was in her office, doing what Kyle guessed must be some kind of honeypot work, as she was engaged in a very spicy French phone call while taking copious notes. Danny and Brian Foster were both on missions, according to their section chiefs. Anya was busy training kids. And most of the German friends he'd made had been transferred out, showcasing the lack of permanence of most of Camp Hero's staff.

Kyle did eventually find two of his friends, above ground. There was an old battery near the beach that had become used as a kind of mechanic's shop for various vehicles for both on and off-planet applications. Within the shop, Kyle found Jack Flynn and Yoshiro Tsurabaya, whom he'd known in Okinawa. Both were intently tinkering with what appeared to be a levitating motorcycle of some kind. Kyle approached.

"Can I help?" Kyle asked.

"Kyle! I didn't know you'd been reassigned to the garage," Jack said.

"I haven't," Kyle confessed. "I had to get away from my desk. Jack, I think I need your advice."

“If you’re not supposed to be here, let’s move the hoverbike into the back,” Tsurabaya said, glancing around surreptitiously. And so they did, slipping the hoverbike into the rear of the building along with the necessary tools. No one stopped them.

Jack: “What do you need advice on?”

Kyle: “A boy has been put into my care. Max. I’m not sure quite how to raise him in this fucked up place. You’re doing it. How?”

Jack: “Well. It’s hardly easy. Where is this Max now?”

Kyle: “He’s before a review panel. Trying to find out where he’d be suited to work.”

Tsurabaya and Jack both looked up with some alarm.

“You need to be there. Now.” Jack said. “Never leave your boy alone in situations like that.”

“What? Why?” Kyle said in confusion.

“Do you want them testing your boy as to whether he can suck dick?” Tsurabaya said bluntly. “It’s different for you Kyle. You didn’t grow up here like Jack and I did. He’s right. You need to get to your boy and guard him on the review panel. I’ll accompany you. Fuck today’s assignment.”

He glanced at Jack, who nodded in immediate approval, and Kyle and Tsurabaya rushed off, Tsurabaya leading the way.

“How long has he been in review?” Tsurabaya asked as they walked

“I’m not sure. Two hours possibly.” Kyle said.

“Right. He’ll be in the paramilitary section of testing now, assuming nothing has gone wrong yet or he isn’t terribly impressive in anything tried so far.” Tsurabaya said.

“You know this routine awfully well,” Kyle observed.

“As I said Kyle, I grew up here. And it seems, so must your boy. And you’re all he has to help him do this.” Tsurabaya explained.

Soon enough, Kyle and Tsurabaya reached the area where the current phase of Max’s testing was occurring. This was on the sixth sublevel, which was unfamiliar to Kyle. It was made up of a maze of training rooms and areas- dojos, virtual reality training areas, shooting ranges, and so on. It was not long before the men found Max in one of the dojos, fighting blindfolded with a wooden practice sword against Anya Mittelauer.

The review board stood to the side. It was composed of perhaps a dozen people, most of whom Kyle could not identify. He did, however, recognize Nicholas and Dr. Simmons, and at Nicholas’s side stood a taller, thinner, rather more Germanic man whom Kyle deduced to be the man called Bielek whom he had heard so much about but hadn’t seen. The review board all carried either glass pads or clipboards, and some were writing in them at the sight of the fight.

Max, it turned out, performed quite well at sword fighting while blindfolded. His third eye was clearly quite open. Kyle was impressed.

The review panel paid no attention to Kyle and Tsurabaya when they entered the dojo. This changed when the exercise was over, and the review panel moved on to its next phase.

“Tin Man! You’re not authorized to be here.” Nicholas said. Then, upon seeing Tsurabaya, he added; “Neither are you, Jap. Get lost.”

“My benefactor ordered our presence,” Kyle said, sending a sympathetic but firm “stand down” message to Tsurabaya telepathically, whom he could tell was preparing for a fight.

“Your ‘benefactor’? He’s your owner, Tin Man. But he’s not mine.” Nicholas spat out. Then, turning to the review board; “I’m going to my office to sort out this horseshit.”

“Boy, come with me,” Nicholas added, gesturing to Max.

“We can’t let this go through, under any circumstance,” Tsurabaya said telepathically to Kyle.

Kyle didn’t need to be told twice. He put his hand up to the advancing Nicholas, making direct eye contact.

“No. I don’t believe you actually are,” Kyle said, in his most condescending German, with a pedantic smile on his face.

Nicholas paused. His eyes narrowed.

“Fuck you,” Nicholas hissed to Kyle in a very low voice.

“You’re not my type. Nor are you my benefactor’s,” Kyle said aloud.

A deathly silence fell for several seconds, followed by an uproar of laughter among the review panel. Nicholas was the last to join in, but he eventually did. Kyle noticed that Bielek never did.

“Well,” Nicholas said, “on second thought, perhaps not. Let’s get back to work, ladies and gents.”

And so the review panel continued. It went on for hours, and Kyle and Tsurabaya accompanied every step of the way. Max was tested on telepathy, being seated on a chair while the panel sat behind a long table, doing various telepathy exercises, such as stating what was on certain cards facing away from him, and

telling the review board members what they'd had for breakfast that morning. Max passed this set of tests with 100% accuracy.

Max next underwent a remote viewing test, being sat blindfolded and told to extract information from a set of coordinates. He passed. He failed his telekinesis test, attempting to crush a soda can with his mind. Max was also made to run on a treadmill, tested on his marksmanship abilities, and so forth. He seemed to excel in approximately 90% of the skills he was tested on. In spite of the strained circumstances, Kyle felt a sense of fatherly pride at his boy's prowess. And he felt relief as well, as it would ensure Max's survival.

At no point was Max offered any food of drink. One time, he expressed a need to relieve himself, and Tsurabaya accompanied him. Kyle would later learn that he had taken pity and given Max a chocolate bar, produced from who knows where.

At the end of the day, the group piled into a tram, and went to Dr. Simmons's lab. She took blood, urine, and hair samples from Max, with the promise that she would run the "necessary tests" in the morning. And so concluded the review panel, with everyone sent back to their barracks for the night.

Kyle, Max, and Tsurabaya walked together most of the way. As they were approaching the German barracks, they heard the sound of Cantopop coming from the little red Victrola. Max ran ahead to be closer to it, and Tsurabaya turned to walk to his own barracks.

Kyle: "Wait."

Tsurabaya: "Yes?"

Kyle: "What was that all about back there? The little con-

frontation? I believe Emmermann would have given his blessing. Why not let him, and embarrass Nicholas?"

Tsurabaya shook his head, a sad smile on his lips. He slipped, likely unconsciously, into his native Japanese for what he said next.

Tsurabaya: "Still so naive Kyle. He wasn't going to call Emmermann. He was going to defile your boy. That's what he does to children who are alone in his office. We prevented it this time, thankfully."

Kyle paused, stunned. He'd heard rumors to this effect of course. But the confrontation of the fact that his boy had come so close stumped him for a moment before he gathered the strength to speak again.

"Yoshiro-San," Kyle said, addressing Tsurabaya by his given name for the first time, "why are you helping me?"

Tsurabaya shrugged. "Because, for the first time, I can. And your boy is special Kyle. You know that. Don't forget it."

And with that, Tsurabaya turned away.

Kyle turned towards the barracks, his mind a complexity of emotions; rage, sadness, fatherly protectiveness, but most especially a new resolve. Kyle felt he could no longer simply observe the conditions leading to the "regime change" Emmermann spoke of. He must act. He must, to his capabilities, assist in whatever resistance must be fomenting in this awful place. And Kyle had a feeling that finding Emmermann's photographer might be his first step.

Author's note. A sobering chapter, likely to be triggering for some of my readers. However, the intrigue will pick up soon.

Chapter 13

Kyle's search for a photographer proved rather simpler than anticipated. He began by asking his few friends for someone suitable. Someone long-standing at Camp Hero, who was artistic, hated the current regime, could keep a secret, and had enough access that their experience would matter. Only one name consistently came up; Sondra Saunders-Roth, the very first person Kyle had met on his arrival at Camp Hero.

As for Max, he continued adapting. The review board reconvened, with Max and Kyle both present, and concluded that Max was likely best suited for combat and espionage roles, which Jimmy assured Kyle were likely the best for his continued survival and comfort. It seemed a paradox, but somehow, Kyle believed it. He certainly didn't like the idea of Max in an office, surrounded by strange adults, while Kyle worked at his own desk all day.

An interesting discovery regarding Max was made when Dr. Simmons read off the results of the genetic tests she had done on him. The data showed obvious signs of gene therapy, likely both in utero and out, which had made Max, in Dr. Simmons's own words, "more human than human."

In-between their respective missions, Max would spend his time at or near Kyle's desk, as invisible as he could be in the circumstance. And when Kyle left on a mission, he'd escort Max

to one of his friends and leave him in their safekeeping. A routine emerged, and they adapted very well indeed. Max began to make his own friends, and so normalcy started to set in.

Upon receiving the recommendation, Kyle set his mind to recruiting Sondra as the photographer. Consequently, he approached Jimmy, and asked if he could possibly arrange for a shared mission between himself and Sondra.

Jimmy guffawed at this request.

“Kyle, I’m not God. The Chile thing was an innocuous little mission that anyone could have gone on, and Max’s bed arrangement was only doable because we have excess beds. I cannot simply arrange for you to be on a mission with the wife of one of my bosses.” Jimmy said.

“Oh,” Kyle said, and then stood thinking in Jimmy’s office for nearly a full minute. An idea struck him.

“Could she herself? If I spoke to her that is.” Kyle asked.

“You could. But her office and home are kept bugged. I have a better idea. Tonight, I want you as my personal bodyguard, at a party I’m attending. The Roths will both be present, I’m certain. It’s at the big manor house. If you can get Sondra alone there, I think you’ve got a shot.” Jimmy said, nodding slowly.

“Is this office not bugged?” Kyle asked.

“I don’t have a history of escape attempts,” Jimmy replied. “So, how does this arrangement seem to you?”

Kyle shrugged. “I suppose it’s as good an arrangement as any. What sort of party is this? And where?”

“Coat and tie affair. I’ll put in an order down at the costume department. Head there. And don’t bring Max. Some people will

think he's a party favor. Don't worry, not that kind of party, but some people are, let's say, incorrigible." Jimmy said.

Kyle felt another wave of homicidal rage sweep over him, but said nothing, and merely turned, striding with purpose towards the costume warehouse on sub-level four. As usual, he found it staffed by Angelique Toussaint, the Haitian he'd met just before his first mission.

Angelique: "Hello Kyle. I just received an order from Jimmy. You need a suit?"

Kyle: "Yes, I suppose Jimmy doesn't waste time."

Angelique: "No. I daresay he doesn't. Come with me please."

And so Angelique showed Kyle to the back of the warehouse, to what appeared to be a closet with a small rectangle of glass in the center of the door. A touchscreen was mounted in the wall beside the door.

"It's a clothing printer," Angelique explained, typing something on the tablet which Kyle couldn't see.

"Your measurements from the system," she said, then turned looking Kyle over with the scrutiny only stylists are capable of.

"You look like a Hugo Boss man," Angelique said after a moment. "And your color is black."

Without another word, Angelique typed in these specifications. Kyle made no objection. He had many skills, but an eye for fashion was definitely not one of them. He simply didn't care.

Not 15 minutes later, a sharp three-piece suit was printed, along with a white shirt. Angelique also outfitted Kyle with a dark magenta bow tie and a pair of fine black and white dress

shoes. Kyle gathered these up and took them with him. He now needed to find someone to watch Max for the night. For now, Max was safe in Kyle's office area. However, the office would be closed by the time of the party, and Kyle didn't particularly trust the barracks to be safe.

And so, Kyle walked around Camp Hero to a number of his friends. As it turned out, most were either on missions, or were attending the party themselves. Danny was still off-base, and Anya Mittelbraun had classes to teach all through the night due to a new "shipment" of young Israeli "supplies."

After over two hours of walking, Kyle found himself at Norma Jean's office. The door was closed, so he knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Kyle."

"Oh. Come right in Kyle."

Kyle entered, to find Norma Jean standing in front of a mirror in her undergarments, next to her desk. Strewn on her desk were various clothing items and bits of makeup.

"Oh shit. Do I need to come back later?" Kyle asked.

"Don't be silly Kyle, you've seen me in far more compromising positions. Just try not to ogle too much."

"No promises," Kyle said with a chuckle. "But down to business, I was wondering if you'd watch Max tonight. But I can see you're attending the same function as myself."

"I'd be glad to," Norma Jean said as she began fiddling with her makeup, "bring him along."

"Won't he be seen as a party favor?" Kyle asked.

"Kyle, I know how to handle these fuckers. I'll take good care

of Max. He's got a filthy mouth, but he's a little sweetheart."

"I believe you. But are you sure this is wise?"

In response, Norma Jean unclasped her bra and moved it aside, showing that, underneath it, she had concealed a tiny but very effective plasma pistol.

"Now stop worrying. And besides, my date for the party is Ezekiel. No one bothers a girl who has a lizard man for a date. I promise, Max will be safe." Norma Jean said.

"Very well, I suppose," Kyle said. He was still rather apprehensive, but it seemed the only solution at the time. And so Kyle left.

Within about six hours, the office shut down. Max had no suit, his fanciest set of clothes being a pair of jeans, a white t-shirt, and a blue sports jacket. Eventually, a tram came by the barracks to carry attendees to the party. Kyle looked and saw that Jimmy was not on it. However, Norma Jean was, seated on one of the tram benches next to Ezekiel, the black, spiky-tailed reptilian he had briefly met. Norma Jean, dressed finely in a white cocktail dress, tapped under her while looking at Kyle as she waved Max aboard, reassuring him of her protective capabilities. Kyle trusted her, and somehow, he trusted Ezekiel. So with a bit less apprehension than before, he released Max.

A few minutes later, Jimmy arrived in his Jeep. Kyle started to climb into the passenger seat, but Jimmy stopped him.

"You're the security. You drive," he said with a grin, climbing from the driver's seat. With a shrug, Kyle obeyed, and under Jimmy's direction, drove towards the party.

The party, it turned out, was being held at the infamous

Montauk Manor, about 20 minutes' drive from Camp Hero, deep in Montauk Township. This was all still in the time bubble/pocket reality, which covered this entire portion of Long Island. The manor was, according to Jimmy, Nicholas's house. It was a massive manor house in the southern English style, with pointed roofs and brown and white boarding on the outside.

This house still exists in the version of Montauk Township outside the time bubble, so the reader may view it in their preferred search engine.

Kyle and Jimmy pulled up in front of the manor, where a valet rushed up in order to park the Jeep, and Kyle and Jimmy walked up the arched path to the monstrous house, from which the sounds of music and chatter were echoing.

Kyle had wondered if Angelique had perhaps overdressed him. This turned out to be the opposite of the case. The party was very high-class indeed, of the cocktail and dancing sort. It was taking place in both the great hall, and the several ballrooms which opened off of it. The floors were checkered in black and white marble, and the walls paneled in oak and mahogany, decorated with Elizabethan and Victorian artwork.

It didn't look like the home of a serial child rapist, but then what does the home of a serial child rapist look like? Kyle thought to himself.

"Blend in. Just stay in range of me," Jimmy instructed. "Like any other gig you might have of guarding a party. And I'll remember the real mission."

"Roger," Kyle said, already scanning the room to find Sondra.

Sondra was easy to find. She was one of a very few attendees

who was neither white nor East Asian, and was dressed quite strikingly, in a crimson cocktail dress, with matching lipstick and nail polish. Her thick black hair was pulled up into a confusion of braids and twists, held in place by pins and combs which were studded with various gems. By Kyle's estimation, her age had been adjusted to being about 25, and were it not for his own racial biases, he'd have likely found her very attractive. He held back on approaching this early in the night. He'd wait until the guests had all arrived and the party had commenced in earnest.

Kyle followed Jimmy's direction of staying close and mingling with the guests. Eventually, he found himself next to Max, whom Norma Jean was guarding, as she'd promised.

"Look over there," Max said to Kyle, gesturing discreetly at a slight, dark haired woman who was standing near Nicholas, though clearly not by choice.

"What about her?" Kyle asked.

"Kyle, that's Judy fucking Garland!" Max exclaimed incredulously in a low voice.

"Watch your language, Kid. And is that name important?" Kyle, in his sheltered and isolated life, had precious little knowledge of Hollywood.

Max chuckled. "You need to get out more."

Kyle continued observing Sondra as time went on. She was seemingly a very controlled woman, hardly ever leaving Ivan Roth's side, and when she did, she was next to a Hispanic looking woman of perhaps 35, whose name Kyle didn't know. He guessed that she must be Sondra's handler.

As a result, approaching was logistically difficult. Eventually, opportunity came. All the music was live, with songs sung both by guests and a hired female singer. A small stage was set up for this in the great hall, upon which was a microphone and a small band. To Kyle's surprise, he saw Danny was the drummer of the band. So that was why he'd been unreachable that day.

At one point, apparently urged by her husband and handler, Sondra took to the stage, and sang like a siren the following song.

I've got stones in my pocket
No feathers in my bed
I see the road, and I'm walking
But my legs are made of lead

Oh, oh, save me, won't you save me from my ways?
Oh save me, won't you save me from my ways?
Cause the only way I know how to live
The only way I know, is killing me

I've been climbing that high mountain
Slide back down every day
And I've been drinking from the fountain
But I'm thirsty anyway

Oh, oh, save me, won't you save me from my ways?
Oh save me, won't you save me from my ways?
Cause the only way I know how to live

The only way I know, is killing me

I said “Never!” but I did it
What I thought I’d never do
I took a stone from my pocket
And I threw it right at you

Oh, oh, save me, won’t you save me from my ways?
Oh, save me won’t you save me from my ways?
Oh save me
Won’t you save me from my ways?

Cause the only way I know how to live
The only way I know, is killing you
And now the only way I know, is killing me

The few who were actually listening clapped when the song concluded, and Kyle, seeing his opportunity, walked up to her as she left the stage. Her husband and handler had slipped into the crowd during her song.

“Hello Ms. Saunders-Roth. Do you remember me?” Kyle saw no point in wasting time.

“Herr Dellschau. Yes, I remember you. My husband speaks well of your music.”

“I see. Thank him for me. However, it’s you I wish to speak to. I’d like to make you an offer of something I think we’ll both enjoy the benefits of.”

“If you’re referring to your penis, Herr Dellschau, I believe

you'll need to look elsewhere. Don't get me wrong, you have plenty going for you, but judging by those cuff links, I don't think we're compatible."

Kyle somehow managed to stop himself from doubling over with laughter. He hadn't even noticed the swastika cufflinks that Angelique had included in his outfit, and kicked himself mentally over this. His observation skills had slipped in recent days. However, Sondra's blunt manner amused him in a way he wasn't quite used to.

"No," Kyle explained once he'd recovered himself, "this offer is strictly some mutually beneficial business."

"Well. Alright. Buy me a drink and show me a good dance, and we'll talk."

"Lead the way," Kyle said, already digging out his wallet. He was never paid of course, but he had learned how to skim bits of cash. And so they moved towards the bar, which was set up in one of the ballrooms.

"Sidecar, on the rocks, add a splash of Maraschino juice, and he's buying," Sondra said to the bartender, gesturing at Kyle.

"And a vodka and lemonade, same tab," Kyle added.

Kyle and Sondra stood and discussed their respective jobs while they sipped their drinks. Kyle explained his role as a protection and translation expert, being careful to not use the word "synthetic," in case Sondra had a bias.

Sondra also explained her job; she was, at that particular time, an assassin. A good one, if her estimation of herself was to be believed, not that Kyle doubted it. They also discussed, to an extent, the difficulties of their job, but were cautious in what

they divulged while standing at the bar. Kyle got enough of an impression from it- while he couldn't trust Sondra, he felt that she'd accomplish this job quite well, if he could get her to agree to it.

"I think I'd like that dance now," Sondra said suddenly, as the sounds of a tango started echoing from the great hall.

"Not going to finish the drink I spent my money on for you?" Kyle asked.

Sondra shrugged. "Shitty drink. He didn't use Remy Martin."

Kyle chucked, took one long sip of his vodka and lemonade, set it aside, then extended his hand to Sondra to led her to the dance floor. Most of the major dances, including the tango, were already programmed into him, so there was no difficulty. He decided to make his proposal as they danced. But as it happened, Sondra took the initiative.

Sondra: "So. You claim to have something we'd both enjoy. What is it?"

Kyle: "A camera. A Leica M6, to be exact. I hear you're an artist, so you know what that means."

Sondra: "I certainly do. What's your price, Herr Dellschau? I know there is one, you referenced mutual benefit earlier."

Kyle: "Well. I'm told you don't like the system. I work for a man who has a vested interest in seeing it fall. I want you to take pictures for me of relevant things. Missions. Facilities on base. The works. And I also wish to occasionally be on missions alongside you. Quality control purposes."

Sondra: "And what do I get in exchange?"

Kyle: "Monetary compensation. And the satisfaction of

knowing that your ass is doing something, rather than standing around sipping Sidecars."

This first promise was a lie, but a necessary one. He had no clue if Emmermann would compensate Sondra, or indeed any photographer he chose. The conversation continued.

Sondra: "You're very blunt, Herr Dellschau. I can appreciate that. However what I don't appreciate is your politics."

Kyle: "I fail to see how my politics are relevant here."

Sondra: "Your politics are always relevant, Herr Dellschau. And since you don't serve the current regime, I must assume you serve another. Namely Der Bund, and that your boss also serves them. I'll take your little job on two conditions; the first, I want to meet your boss. The second, I want access to your connections. Because I intend to escape this shithole."

Kyle: "The first is difficult. The second, gladly. However I must ask why. Do you not have your own connections?"

Sondra: "I'm a monitored woman. And our operations are different. My contacts are known to my monitors. Yours are not. I want the names of people you meet. Help me network my escape. And make my first stipulation happen. If you do this, Herr Dellschau, I'll take pictures of whatever the hell you want me to."

They finished the dance largely in silence, and when it was complete, returned to their earlier positions as seemingly normal party guests. To keep up appearances, Jimmy loudly scolded Kyle for slipping away from his post to talk to a girl, and Kyle gave a performative apology.

The rest of the evening passed without incident. Kyle

continued in his cover role of guarding Jimmy, and at one point, had the opportunity to speak to the woman whom Max had said was Judy Garland. She rolled her eyes at the name, and revealed that while yes, a fractal of herself had once used that name, her name was Nancy Berg, and she had no interest in any other identity.

Jimmy, in keeping with what were apparently his normal habits, chose to leave early, so Kyle left alongside him, gathering Max as he did, and they drove back to Camp Hero proper, with Kyle explaining Sondra's demands. Jimmy explained that while he couldn't assist much, he at least had the capability of arranging meetings after shared missions, to exchange photographs and payment.

Kyle and Max returned to the barracks to find that it was well after lights out, and that they had to stumble in the dark to their bunks. They weren't the only ones doing so that night. For over an hour afterwards, men were occasionally stumbling in, in various states of drunkenness. This sort of thing was not infrequent, but it was Kyle's first time witnessing the cause.

The next morning, Kyle went to work, and Max went to his classes that he had started in the previous few days. He was being trained in combat, in large part by Anya Mittelbraun, who gave Kyle reports at the end of the day. Max always gave reassurances that nothing untoward happened, and Kyle forced himself to believe it.

As was routine, Kyle went on a mission that day. This one involved simply sitting in an apartment in 1920s Paris, with the asset he was spying living in the apartment beneath his. The

mission lasted for three years, and was decidedly uninteresting. Kyle was only to watch the asset, a young French woman whose name he has since forgotten, and he was only to observe her as she walked back and forth from her cover job at a cafe across the street. When a black car came to pick her up occasionally, Kyle was disallowed from going along.

His mission complete, he returned to Camp Hero to find, as usual, that less than five minutes had passed. As there were a number of hours left in the day, and it was unlikely that he would be sent out again, Kyle went into his favorite utility closet to begin, if he could, the process of arranging for Sondra to meet with Emmermann.

He took out his glass pad, sat on top of a box, then opened up the messaging function on the tablet. He messaged Georg Nimmer. Ordinarily, their chat was for discussing the music they played, the women they slept with, and their favorite guns. Today's was a topic more essential. Kyle messaged, asking for an urgent call.

Georg, as ever, did not disappoint. Not 10 minutes passed before the glass pad "rang," and Kyle answered. He was greeted by Georg's face. He was reclined on a plush red couch.

"Kyle! Brother! You have urgent business? I'm in a house of ill repute, let's make this fast," Georg said, cheerful as ever.

Kyle smiled at the sight of his old friend.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your fun time, my old friend. But I'm afraid this is important business. Can you get somewhere private?"

"Well shit. Yes, I'll get somewhere private. Give me an hour."

“Alright. One hour. Over and out,” Kyle said. He chose not to ask how Georg was occupying the allotted hour. He trusted his friend to have the sense to abandon the “house of ill repute” and that the hour was spent getting to a secure location.

Kyle returned to his desk, and sat once again, pretending to wait for an assignment. The hour passed quite slowly, as one would expect. But it did pass, and Kyle stole away once again to the closet. Georg was punctual as ever, and the meeting commenced. Georg was now seated in a vehicle, and Kyle got directly to business.

Kyle: “I have a request. And I’m afraid it’s a rather big one.”

Georg: “What do you need, Old Friend?”

Kyle: “You’re aware, I imagine, that our benefactor has sent me a camera and an order to find someone to take pictures of the happenings here?”

Georg: “No. The old man never tells me what the fuck is going on unless I’m involved. Do continue.”

Kyle: “Well. I found my photographer. But she’s demanding a meeting with our benefactor before she’ll do it. You’re with him more than me. Is there any way to arrange this?”

Georg: “That is a big ask. But I’m with him tonight. I’ll make the request. Who is she? How is she reached?”

Kyle laid out all he knew, at least most of it. He left out Sondra’s demands of being paid. He had no doubt that if the meeting went through, that she would certainly make these demands known.

Several days passed, from the linear time within the Camp Hero time bubble. Of course, it was longer for Kyle, as he had to

go on missions of various lengths. He was gradually growing accustomed to these time distortions.

As it turned out, he needn't have worried as much as he did. Just a few days after Kyle had laid everything out for Georg, he received a notice on his computer. He was being called to Jimmy's office. If he'd breathed, he undoubtedly would have held his breath on the walk.

Kyle reached the office, and Jimmy looked up.

"Your benefactor's tentacle has no limit, it seems," he said, as he handed over a folded piece of paper. "From the lady herself."

Kyle opened it, and then chuckled at Sondra's "chicken scratch" handwriting, so at odds with her personality.

The note itself simply said; "Payment situation sorted. I'm in."

"I suppose she's in," Jimmy said humorously. "I know a dead drop you can use. At the back of the radar tower is a bit of woods with paths and a few benches. Unguarded area. The benches have little engraved plaques on them. One of them is dedicated to "Lost Songwriters." The bushes behind it will serve as your dead drop."

"Jawohl," Kyle said without thinking, and left Jimmy's office with some renewed assurance.

It was during these days that Kyle began to feel that he needed something to give Max when he came of age. Aside from his Seiko watch and flight jacket, he had no earthly possessions. However, as always, he had music. And since for now, Max was not going on missions with him, he was

separated from Max for long stretches of time, which was exceedingly difficult for him. And so, he wrote a song to express this separation, with the determination to give it to Max when he came of age.

Put a candle in the window
Cause I feel I've got to move

Though I'm going, going
I'll be coming home soon
Long as I can see the light

Pack my bag and let's get moving
Cause I'm bound to drift a while

Though I'm gone, gone
You don't have to worry no, no
Long as I can see the light

Guess I've got that old traveling bone
Cause this feeling won't leave me alone

But I won't, won't
Be losing my way, no, no
Long as I can see the light
Yeah, yeah, yeah
Oh, yeah

Put a candle in the window
Cause I feel I've got to move
Though I'm going, going
I'll be coming home soon
Long as I can see the light

It was in the few days following this that the situation of Sondra's recruitment finally moved forward, and Kyle's angst lessened. The notice on his computer said that he was to head to the usual briefing area, and included a list of those on the mission.

Claudia Greene (Overseer)
Sondra Saunders-Roth (Wet Work)
Kyle Dellschau (Security)
Maximilian Bronsley (Trainee)

A compact team, Kyle thought. It would make it more difficult to isolate Sondra for one-on-one conversations, but he was up to the challenge. He stood, walked to the closet where he'd tucked Max away with a book, collected Max, and they marched off towards the briefing room.

They reached it to find that Sondra and the mysterious Claudia Greene were already awaiting them. Claudia, it turned out, was Sondra's handler whom Kyle had seen at the party a few linear days previously. She was very pretty, with bronzed skin and thick dark hair. She spoke with a rather posh Essex accent. She stood at over six feet tall, and was gripping Sondra's arm in the way of a prison guard, which, Kyle realized, is what she was.

“Greetings, Dellschau. Young Bronsley. We have a job to do,” Greene said in obvious impatience.

At Max’s name, Sondra looked at Max with a look that Kyle at first couldn’t decipher, but soon did. It was an odd mix of curiosity, some shock, some sadness, and a sense of loss. However, Sondra said nothing, leaving Kyle to wonder and speculate.

The briefing went over as usual. In essence, it was a case of assassination, retrieval, and delivery in Spain and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1875. All through the briefing, Greene never relinquished her death grip on Sondra’s arm.

With the briefing complete, and the promise of leaving in 24 hours, Kyle decided to test Max on a few things, and went with him down to the armory for 1875 appropriate weapons, and then above ground to one of the shooting ranges on “Stanford’s Green.”

He handed Max one of the guns, a Colt revolver.

“Kid, you know how to handle one of these?” Kyle asked.

“Of course I do,” Max said with a slightly offended air.

“Alright, you know-it-all little bastard. Prove it.” Kyle said playfully.

And so Max did. He loaded and unloaded the pistol quite well, and while his marksmanship was far from perfect, it got the job done. At the end, Kyle decided Max deserved a treat of some sort.

“Mi Pequeño, what do they serve in the classes you’re in?”

Max shrugged. “Usually a sandwich and some chips. Some fruit if we’re lucky. Same as in the barracks and office canteen.

Why?"

"I think I can rustle up something better than that for you. Can you get back to the barracks, and I'll meet you in an hour?"

"I appreciate that you want to treat me like back in Chile. But I'm not sure I know the way back to the barracks from here, Dad."

Kyle stopped and got down on a knee to face Max. This was the first time Max called him "Dad." He felt a wash of warmth all over.

"What's wrong? You're staring like you've never seen me before," Max said.

Kyle smiled, and decided not to spoil the moment.

"Oh nothing. I just thought I'd never hear you admit you didn't know something. You're usually so fucking cocky. Come on Kid, you can come with me for your treat." Kyle said, standing and taking Max's hand.

They walked through the compound to the area that, when outside the time bubble, forms the township of Montauk. On his few trips through, Kyle had seen that there were a number of stores in this part, as well as a few small restaurants. This was generally only the realm of officers, however Kyle felt he now had a reason to begin spending his skimmed cash, most of which was colonial currency from missions, which his barrack mates seemed willing to exchange for American currency, likely because everyone skimmed cash.

Kyle's initial plan had been to buy a few things and eat them in the barracks with Max. However, since they were together, they stepped into a proper restaurant; "Meryl's Fine Cooking."

This turned out to be a 50s style American diner, with all the usual fare. Simply so he wouldn't look strange by not eating, Kyle ordered fish and chips. Max, on the other hand, was apparently quite hungry, and devoured a steak with three eggs, and then, upon receiving Kyle's assurance that it was no issue, ordered another steak, and still had room for the desert of the day, which was apple pie with ice cream and warm berry sauce.

Kyle was slightly concerned as to how malnourished Max might actually be, after seeing him eat so much. He didn't yet understand the way that young boys are prone to bouts of intense hunger, especially when they've been run around all day. Whatever the case, now that he was fully nourished, he slept very soundly in his bunk below Kyle's, and they awoke the following day ready for the final preparations for the mission.

As it happened, Sondra was sent alone to gather Kyle and Max. This enabled Kyle to finally hand off the camera, along with several rolls of film.

"Will you be able to conceal it on the trip?" Kyle asked.

"I'm going to be wearing Victorian era clothing for the duration. Those big skirts are a pain in the ass, but they're very good for hiding things. Now let's stop standing out here talking before someone asks what we're doing." she replied tersely.

Everyone was soon bundled up and braced for the trip. They dressed in stalls which stood next to each other, and Kyle and Sondra had to go through considerable chicanery in order to pass the camera back and forth as they changed. They went on to gather the documents, get the luggage, and finally proceed through the portal. They would come to regret not checking

their documents beforehand.

They arrived in 1875 Madrid unmolested, portaling into an alleyway with no windows. They walked in groups of two to their hotel in the center of the city. Across the street was a building of swanky apartments, the room which Sondra and Greene shared being directly across from the apartment of their interest. Greene checked in as some member of British aristocracy, and registered Sondra as her Indian lady's maid. Kyle and Max registered as a Prussian father and son. The two pairs didn't acknowledge each other out in the open.

Kyle and Max were not informed of much, as the usual procedure went. They knew that on an unspecified number of days after arrival, the man that Sondra and Greene were surveilling would receive a set of blueprints, and at that point, the group would approach him for what was apparently a planned pickup. However, he would be killed, and the group would take the blueprints to another contact in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The nature of the blueprints were a mystery to all but those who had planned this mission and possibly Greene.

As it turned out, they stayed nearly a week. At a certain point Kyle, at the behest of one of the young gents who brought the dinner, slipped out for a quick trip to the local brothel, leaving Max armed in the hotel room. He'd been without release of this nature for several weeks, which was too long for someone of his kind. He made sure to spend less than an hour away. He had assessed that the hotel was safe, however he didn't imagine that Greene would approve if she found out the reason he had

left.

The day came, and the quartet gathered their weapons and packed their clothes for what they thought was going to be a long train journey to Pressburg. As their luggage was prepared, they went to their meeting in the apartment building next door to the hotel, with Kyle leading the way, under Greene's orders, though he'd have done so anyway.

They were not stopped as they approached the apartment, their weapons concealed in their garments. It was Greene who finally knocked.

A young and petite red haired man with the typical Victorian handlebar mustache, the man whom they had been surveilling coming and going, answered the door.

"Who is it?" he asked, in what Kyle calculated as a Polish accent.

"The Brits," Greene said, extending her hand.

"And the Prussians," Kyle added, extending his own hand.

"You're three days early," the Pole said.

A pause.

"Chalk it up to Germanic punctuality," Max interjected, pulling off a flawless Königsberg accent, to Kyle's surprise, relief, and delight.

"Right," the Pole answered, making eye contact with all members of the party in turn.

"They'll hire anyone these days," he muttered after observing Max and Sondra.

The Pole ushered them in, and opened the roller top desk which stood on a far wall. Kyle observed that inside it were the

blueprints.

“Show me the money,” he said.

Greene opened the alligator bag she’d been carrying, showing him the cash they had brought, then closed it again.

“How about a drink? Toast to our business,” she said, gesturing to an end table with a number of bottles.

“Right,” the little Pole said, and turned to fulfill the order.

The moment he turned, Greene gave a quick nod to Sondra, who drew from her corset what appeared to be a Colt Single Action Army revolver, and fired three rounds in quick succession at the man’s back. The gun must have been a special replica of some kind, as there was only the faintest pop, and the bullets were clearly supersonic.

The man whirled at being shot, and the look on his face was not one of pain nor even shock, but rage, and he began lunging forward.

Greene sent a telepathic message to the group; “He’s augmented.”

“No shit,” was Max’s telepathic input.

The Pole lunged forward.

“You little bitch!” he screamed in Polish.

Sondra fired another shot, however Kyle stepped in to do his job. He firmly shoved Sondra aside, getting in the path of the man now charging like an enraged bull, his eyes fixed on Sondra. Kyle stepped forward, swinging a punch to the man’s center mass that would have sent a normal human flying at least 10 feet. This man barely took a step back, putting his augmented status beyond doubt.

The man thrust his fist towards Kyle's face, in an attempt to punch back. Kyle deftly dodged and grabbed the outstretched arm, giving it a rough twist. He heard the unmistakable sound of reinforced artificial bone snapping, and with an extra kick, he brought the Pole to the ground and began choking him.

Sondra stepped forward to the pinned down man, lifted her skirt enough to withdraw a dagger from her left boot, and before anyone could guess what exactly she had planned, raised it and plunged it into the man's head right above his left eye before he had a chance to escape Kyle's grasp.

The Pole didn't die from this gesture. However, he was obviously very weakened, and his eyes darted back and forth wildly as Kyle lifted him to a standing position, grasped the Pole's head, and gave it a sharp twist that he knew would cause full internal decapitation. At last, the Pole went limp, and Kyle tossed him onto a couch near him.

"Thank you," Sondra said, stepping to the body and pulling out the dagger she had thrust into his head and wiping it on the couch, being careful not to get any blood on herself or her clothes. Kyle saw that the blade was pure diamond, hence how it had pierced a reinforced skull.

"Don't mention it," Kyle said.

"Grand. Let's get going," Greene said, already stepping up to the roller top desk and removing the blueprints to put into her alligator bag, from which she had pulled everyone's passports and set them on a chair. Everyone walked up to grab theirs, and Max opened his.

"Everyone. Isn't it 1875?" Max asked with alarm in his voice.

“Yes. Why?” Greene asked impatiently.

“Because this passport is dated for 1888. Everyone else check yours,” Max said.

They all hurriedly did so, finding that their passports were all dated for dates that were, looking from that moment, the future. These would never do at the many borders they would have to pass to reach Pressburg.

“What do we do now?” Kyle asked. It was the first real mistake in the Camp Hero machine he had observed.

“We improvise. But we can’t stay in this flat. Who knows when the cleaning lady might show up. We need to get to our luggage, and then somewhere out of town” Greene said decisively.

“We could try jumping the rails, like in those old movies,” Sondra suggested as they filed down the hallway. Apparently no one liked this idea, because no one so much as commented on it.

They made it back to the hotel, and found their luggage was already in the foyer, and a porter was waiting for them. Kyle had an inspiration and approached the porter.

“My son and I have decided to escort these two ladies,” he said in perfect Spanish and pointed to Sondra and Greene. “Please load our luggage onto a single cab only.”

He looked over to Greene, who simply nodded. Kyle walked up to her.

“Alright. Now we’re not separated. Now what?”

“We tell him to take us to the countryside. Tell him to take us to some obscure ruins that we won’t have heard of.” Sondra

interjected. “We can make contact with base out there. We can’t stay in town.”

“We’re going fucking camping?” Max said with disgust.

“Watch your language,” Kyle said sharply, though he’d realized that this was a losing battle with Max, in any language. “But also, yes. For now.”

They loaded onto the carriage. As they’d only been allowed a single suitcase per person, there wasn’t much to load. The driver thought that their request to be taken to some ruins outside of town was very odd, and grumbled something about his horses being unwilling to walk on anything but cobble-stones, but when he was shown the tip he’d receive, he complied.

When tucked away into the carriage, the quartet talked at length. The idea of walking to Pressburg was brought up, but soon shot down, due to time considerations. It was thought likely that the mission would be cut short when they made contact with Camp Hero, and that the blueprints would be delivered by someone else. Unfortunately, as ever in Project Phoenix, it didn’t go that easily.

As soon as the crew was left at the ruins, suitcases were opened, then Greene withdrew her glass pad, (the only one that had been allowed on the trip) and went out of sight to call in to Camp Hero. Sondra, sensing this as an opportunity, pulled the camera from beneath her skirt, and snapped a few pictures.

Greene returned and addressed the group, her voice dripping with annoyance and disdain. “We’re not being sent home. We have to go on to Pressburg. By hot air balloon. The balloons are

stored five miles northwest of here. We have to go now, we've lost time already."

"Are you fucking kidding?" Sondra spat out. "A hot air balloon?"

"Yes. You have experience, don't you?" Greene said.

"From about a million years ago," Sondra said with a snort. "Well, fuck these clothes."

And with that, to everyone's shock and amusement, Sondra pulled her boot knife once again, and used it to deftly make two slits on her skirt, one in the front and one in the back.

"Everyone turn around," she said. And they did, until she instructed them to turn back around, finding that she had removed her bustle, and hastily tied the two sides of her skirt onto loose makeshift trousers.

With a shrug, Greene followed suit, and the quartet set off. It was high summer, and a number of wild fruits were growing along the route they took. Kyle picked some up and gave them to Max, aware that he hadn't eaten since the light breakfast in the hotel that morning. The enhancements of all in the group rather shined through, as they walked very fast, without rest breaks, and arrived at their set coordinates none the worse for wear. By now they must have been 10 miles outside of Madrid.

The coordinates led them to a clearing deep in the hills, well out of sight of anything. In the clearing were three very large hot air balloons, all deflated at the time. In the basket of one they found a set of white, loose-fitting clothes to change into. For less weight, they realized, and began to change into them, with their backs to each other.

They weren't provided with much beyond that. They were given a compound bow with perhaps a dozen metal arrows, and instructions to use it to hunt their food, as they could not risk having their guns overheard. A rather odd instruction, Kyle thought, since their guns were already nearly silent, and doubtlessly more effective than a bow and arrow.

This discrepancy was explained further in their instructions; their weapons, and most of their clothes, were staying behind. They were to bring only a change of clothes to wear when they arrived in Pressburg. These were to be stored in one basket, alongside their equipment, which included three bottles of pills- one of these pills was to increase oxygen efficiency, one to more or less eliminate the need for water, and the last to raise body temperature, which was necessary at the heights they'd be flying at.

"Could they not have included ones so we wouldn't have to eat?" Max said.

"They want us hunting our food. It's a test. Always another fucking test," Sondra said.

The distribution was decided upon. Two persons in each balloon, Max and Sondra in the one holding the equipment, as they were the lightest, and Kyle and Greene in the other. The third and larger balloon was to hold the propane assembly by which the balloons were filled. With Sondra's instructions as to how, the balloons were filled and loaded, and by nightfall, they were off the ground.

As it turned out, they spent over a fortnight alternating between land and sky. The trip was hell. A day in a hot air

balloon is an adventure- over a fortnight is torture, particularly when the food is insecure and one is not able to bathe and one must relieve oneself in a bucket which is never more than a few feet away from those whom one is sharing a balloon with.

This was further not helped by the temperatures. On the ground it was high summer, yet at the tallest heights they reached, it was well below freezing. They had to always be sure to land in the middle of nowhere to avoid being spotted, and at one point, had to explain themselves to some Bavarian hunters. They claimed to be British naturalists, which was apparently justification enough, though the hunters made hungry eyes at Sondra, and that night she slept next to Kyle.

The most dangerous parts, however, were those spent in inclement weather. They suffered torrential downpours in both southern France and Austria. Unpleasant normally, but when one is in a potentially explosive balloon, very dangerous indeed, as the slightest spark from lightning could cause a balloon to explode, and send its precious cargo flying.

This is not to say there weren't a few pleasant bits. The scenery that they passed over, particularly across portions of France and Switzerland, was truly breathtaking. The few down moments spent in nature were also pleasant, and Kyle was able to teach Max some valuable lessons on hunting and foraging, lessons which would stand him in good stead for the life he led and still does, though at the time Max complained a great deal. In some ways, he was still an eight year old.

In a way, Kyle also gained a new respect for Sondra. While he never let go of his racial biases, he had to admit that she was an

excellent forager and an extremely skilled aeronaut, guiding them very ably through even the worst weather and always keeping the balloons at the right height and level of aeration, and even getting them to Pressburg ahead of what the wind charts on Greene's glass pad had predicted, by her calculated manipulation of the balloons. She also managed to take a number of pictures, and successfully hid the camera from Greene.

The way the mission ended was almost laughable. They landed perhaps a mile outside of Pressburg, and Greene called in to Camp Hero to let them know. The commanding officer, whom Kyle did not recognize, ordered them to put their period appropriate clothing back on, walk into Pressburg to the train station, and swap the alligator bag containing the blueprints with an identical one that would be at the feet of their contact. Then they were to walk all the way back to where they had landed, where a portal would be waiting for them.

Too tired to even complain, they walked silently to the Pressburg Banhof, where Greene made the exchange. No one else had been informed of who the contact was, however, Kyle observed the exchange and saw that there were actually two contacts, posing as a couple. Kyle recognized one as Erik Holtz, his barrack mate. He did not recognize the woman he was with, nor did he overhear their short exchanged with Greene. He was too mentally exhausted to care, at that point.

The hike back to the extraction point again passed in silence. There was indeed a portal waiting for them, and everyone went through it. Max was whisked away to be age regressed, even

though he'd only aged a few weeks. The others walked exhaustedly to the showers.

The bespectacled young man who had given the crew faulty documents was never seen again after this incident. The mission was deemed a success, and while it would be some time before Kyle had enough information to piece together its full ramifications, it had begun the allyship between him and Sondra that would prove to be long and storied, as unlikely and awkward as it was.

Author's note. I hope the reader has been kept interested in these somewhat more domestic chapters lately. The city of Pressburg, Austro-Hungarian Empire, mentioned here is now known as Bratislava, Slovakia, and easily viewable on your preferred search engine.

Chapter 14

As time wore on, Emmermann apparently decided that he wasn't getting enough of his money's worth out of Kyle. Either that, or he became desperate for labor. And so, in what is generally agreed to have been sometime in late 1985, both Kyle and Jack Flynn were called into Nicholas's office.

"Your owner is demanding your presence. Apparently I'm not short staffed enough as it is. Get your asses to the landing pad." was all he said.

A pause. "Was I not clear? Fuck off, both of you. And take your boys."

"Very well," Jack said. "I'm sure our benefactor will be delighted to hear about the service in this dump."

They reached the hallway.

"Right," Jack said, "I have to go to the portal room and wait for Andrew. He left on an op a while ago. Where is Max?"

Kyle checked his watch. "In his canteen, I believe. I'll go gather him. We'll reconvene on the landing pad in 20 minutes."

"Right on."

Kyle went to the canteen used by the trainees, on the sixth sub-level. As he'd suspected, Max was seated there, at one of the many long, low-lying cafeteria tables, in rapt conversation with another boy whom Kyle recognized from one of the missions he'd guarded, though his name has since been forgot-

ten. The cafeteria was sleek and futuristic, with blue and chrome walls. At another table sat an odd looking mix of adults and teenagers, whom Kyle imagined were the trainers and handlers. None looked up as Kyle took Max's hand and they left.

"I've been doing what you'd want me to do," Max eventually said as they walked through the labyrinth of halls.

"Oh? And what is that?" Kyle asked.

"Learning the ways to survive. The other kids know this place better than anyone. So I'm making myself their friend." Max explained. Kyle resisted the urge to give Max a pat on the head. He knew it wouldn't be appreciated.

As they walked, Kyle felt the need to give Max some instruction.

"Max, we're going off-planet. I don't know the exact purpose of our trip, I never do. But I do know we'll be meeting with a man. Enmermann. I know we've discussed him before."

"Of course Dad. Nearly every night, you're writing to him."

"Yes. Max, I imagine he'll treat you like a king. And I want you to accept that treatment. Every comfort he affords you, I want you to take advantage. But don't trust him. Not for a second are you to trust that slippery bastard. Am I being clear?"

"Yes Dad. But why?"

"Was me calling him a 'slippery bastard' not enough reason?"

Kyle and Max reached the landing pad, finding Jack and Andrew already waiting, with the usual shipping crate-shaped craft that Emmerman always used to retrieve his people. As they waited for Kyle and Max, they'd been chatting with two

other persons who had obviously alighted from the open craft.

The first person was Georg Nimmer, and Kyle rushed forward upon seeing this in order to hug his oldest friend. He then turned his attention to the other passenger, whom he didn't recognize. She was young, Chinese, and very pretty, by Kyle's estimation. She extended her hand.

"You must be Georg's friend. Kyle? I'm Nadia Wang," she said with a shy smile.

Kyle took the young Miss Wang's hand and kissed it, making full eye contact.

"Enchanté, Mademoiselle," he said.

"Do try to keep it in your pants, Kyle. We have places to be," Georg said impatiently, causing Kyle and Nadia to turn beet red.

Nadia recovered herself first. "Enchanté as well, Mr. Kyle. But I suppose we must go."

"Yes, I suppose we must," Kyle replied, shooting Georg a dirty look. And so they boarded the craft.

The craft, as usual, lifted into the air and "jumped," depositing itself in the orbit of a planet. Kyle looked out the narrow window to see that it was a planet he didn't recognize. Large and with huge oceans and three large continents which were all clearly very thickly forested, and had many snowy mountain peaks.

"Where are we?" Kyle asked.

"Valhalla." Georg answered. "Little chunk of paradise right in our own galaxy."

"I don't even see any city lights," Andrew said as the craft began to descend.

“No,” Nadia responded, beginning to narrate. “Valhalla is almost uninhabited. It’s approximately four times the size of Earth, yet the Solaren population stands at about 5,000. About a third of them work at a pair of households. The rest of them are mostly scientific personnel at various outposts around the planet.”

“And the locals?” someone asked.

“There’s hardly any. The few who are follow an Arcturian archetype of appearance and live tribal lives. Colonial estimates put their numbers at no more than a few thousand. Nearly all the population here is wildlife,” Nadia said.

“And so what does this mean for us?” Kyle said, as the craft began to stop.

“Going by my father’s usual track record? It means a long weekend of peace and relaxation and solitude. Enjoy it, because we’ll be put to work after,” Jack said.

By then, the craft had stopped, and the back end opened. The six passengers stepped out, greeted by a crisp, yet warm blast of mountain air. They were on one side of a deep valley, with mountains rising to miles in height all around them. A crystal clear river flowed through the center of that valley. The trees were enormous and largely resembled cedars, though the bark was a dark brown and the foliage a remarkable dark teal color. The sun was relatively faint, and of the orange K-type star classification.

On the opposite side of the valley, built into and jutting out of the mountain, was a massive Bavarian castle. Further up the valley from the landing pad was an enormous stone bridge,

leading to the castle. A path ran from the landing pad up to the bridge, and the passengers, led by Georg, began to transverse it.

"Well. This is definitely paradise," Andrew said.

The path went for about a quarter mile, up to the stone bridge leading to the Emmermann castle, with the forest on the left and river on the right. From the moment they alighted, they heard the distant sound of alpenhorns. When they reached the bridge, they saw that it was lined with alpenhorn players, in full alpine dress.

"A little slice of Tyrol in some distant corner of the galaxy," Kyle said appreciatively, with a scowl toward Max, who was covering his ears.

The bridge was very long, and as they walked, Kyle and Georg had the following telepathic exchange. The boys and Jack were quite focused on the scenery, and Nadia was clearly in a world of her own.

Kyle: "Georg. What is the meaning of this trip?"

Georg: "I wish I knew the extent. All I know is that the old man is obsessed with Mars at the moment. It's his new political obsession."

Kyle: "Why us? Why do we have to care for his shit?"

Georg: "My dear old friend, do you think you'll ever stop asking that question?"

Kyle: "I'm a synthetic. The day I stop asking questions is the day I go extinct as a man."

Georg: "If I wasn't worried someone would notice, I'd be making a very thoughtful face at that line."

They reached the castle, the front of which opened onto a

stone terrace at the end of the bridge. The group entered, past a pair of guards who stood on either side of the massive wooden double doors. They entered a sprawling hall, with checkered floors of black Carrara marble. The walls, which must have been 25 feet tall, were festooned with various taxidermy animals and animal heads, a few of which were recognizable, such as the head of a white rhinoceros, but the rest were evidently alien creatures. Kyle's eye was particularly taken by an all-white bird, about the same shape as a hummingbird, however, with a wing-span of at least 15 feet.

Emmermann stood in the hall, in full SS regalia, and he rushed forward to greet his guests.

"My grandsons! I had no idea you'd be here!" he exclaimed at seeing Andrew and Max, with an inquisitive look at Kyle and Jack, the latter of whom shrugged.

"Nicholas was in a mood," Jack explained. "You know how he gets. We decided to dodge that bullet and just bring them."

"Well, it's most appreciated." Emmermann replied. Then, getting on one knee and addressing his grandsons; "Come here boys. Großvater hasn't seen you in too long."

"In fact, if you have ever seen me, I didn't see you back," Max said flatly, not following Andrew's example of approaching Emmermann. Kyle suppressed a grin.

"Indeed. I suppose not," Emmermann conceded, "however we shall get to know each other very well indeed in these next few days. Kyle, please come with me. The rest of you, make yourselves at home."

With a slight bit of apprehension, Kyle followed Emmer-

mann. A number of hallways branched off the monstrous entryway, including one directly left of the door. It was down this hallway that Kyle and Emmermann went. It was long and narrow, the carpet was dark green, and the walls an elegant dark wood, studded occasionally with scenic oil paintings.

"Don't worry. I'm not planning to eat you," Emmermann said, as if reading Kyle's thoughts, and perhaps he was.

Kyle decided to play it off.

"No, Sir, I suppose not. I didn't take you for a faggot." Kyle said, earning a laugh from Emmermann.

A ways down the hallway, Emmermann turned and entered a set of wooden double doors, and Kyle followed. They entered a massive, old-fashioned study. Bookshelves lined most of the walls, save one wall which was dominated by a pair of maps. One was an old-fashioned looking galactic map, and the other, a map of Valhalla, the planet they stood on.

Kyle stopped to examine this latter map. He saw that, indeed, Valhalla was very sparsely populated, and that the house (marked on the map as "House Emmermann") was one of only two marked establishments on this particular continent, which was the smallest of three. The other marked establishment, far inland and probably thousands of miles away, was a scientific research facility, one of perhaps half a dozen on the entire planet. On another continent was another house marked as "House Daishono" (a name to remember) and there was apparently a single place on the planet for consular services. That was it.

"You come here for the solace. Although tomorrow night we

won't be getting much, as I'm having a party," Emmermann said.

"Sir, what is this all about?" Kyle asked. The suspense had become too much.

Emmermann: "Your reports. Their content. Or rather, a certain lack of it."

Kyle: "Excuse me Sir, but I leave nothing out, do I?"

Emmermann: "In the facts, no. But one thing is missing; what do you think?"

Kyle: "Think of what, Sir? The female orgasm? The price of tea in China? What?"

Emmermann: "Kyle, you'd be wise to not test my patience. You're only alive because of its existence."

Kyle: "I suppose so, Sir. And I see what you're asking. You wish to know of the conditions for "regime change." In which case, I repeat; what is missing from my reports?"

Emmermann: "I'm not asking what your reports say. I'm asking what you say. You're my top inside man."

Kyle: "Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

Emmermann: "Were you not doing that already?"

Kyle: "Well, to put it simply, change is inevitable. Nicholas is fucked. But so are you, if you're planning some kind of one-man regime for yourself in the inevitable power vacuum, which will be massive and diverse, no matter what."

Emmermann: "I had a feeling you might say something to that effect. Well, thank you Kyle. Now to another matter; I want you getting to know Miss Wang."

Kyle: "I had imagined that I would by default, Sir. I'll be

spending the next few days with her around, won't I?"

Emmermann: "Must I spell everything out my boy? I want you to fuck her."

Kyle grinned. "I had been planning on that already, Sir."

Emmermann returned the smile, in his wolfish way.

"Good. You'll be pleased to know I've already paid her generously for this. She's to come to your room tonight."

"Thank you, Sir. But why is this necessary?" Kyle asked.

Emmermann shrugged. "On your errand, you'll be gone for some time. You'll be three men and one woman. You'll all have to make use of Miss Wang for your needs. Georg has already sampled her, and Jack will tomorrow."

Kyle shrugged in acceptance, deciding not to bother what Emmermann might make of Miss Wang's needs. He knew Emmermann most likely didn't think such needs existed for women.

The meeting over, Emmermann turned his attention to some business on a glass pad, while Kyle was drawn back to the maps. The galactic map had Valhalla circled in red, subtly but visibly, and Kyle could see that it was buried quite deep in the Sagittarius Arm, an area so dense that it was unsurprising that a planet as ideal as Valhalla had been passed over until its discovery by Der Bund. Kyle next perused the books, eventually taking with him a leather bound copy of Journey to the West, then walked into the hallway and back the way he had come, with Emmermann remaining in his study.

Kyle, upon reentering the entryway, heard the voices of some he'd traveled with, as well as music. He followed these

sounds, down another short hallway off the entryway. He found himself in a bar, which rather looked and sounded as though it had been lifted directly from the Prohibition Era. A long, curved wooden bar was set against the far wall, behind which was painted an Art Deco style scenic mural of the mountain range outside. A number of other Art Deco pictures were hung on the stately dark wooden walls. In addition to the bar were small round wooden tables, with curved back wooden chairs. From somewhere, the music of Edith Piaf was wafting, and behind the desk stood a silver robot man in full tuxedo, obviously the bartender. At one of the tables were Kyle's travel companions, minus Max and Andrew.

Kyle approached them. "Where are the boys?" he asked.

"Oh, one of the footmen took them," Jack replied. "He offered to show them the weapons museum. Get them out of our hair for a bit."

"Do I need to go check on them?" Kyle said.

"Kyle, they're fine," Georg said firmly. "What's going to happen to them here? You're on a vacation. We all are. Have a drink and sit with us. Start relaxing."

Kyle went up to the bar and faced the robot man bartender.

"Vodka and lemonade, please," he said.

"Coming right up, Sir," the bartender said in his robotic voice.

"Kyle! It's a sacrilege to drink cheap shit like that in a place like this," Jack exclaimed, bounding from his chair to stand next to Kyle.

Jack addressed the bartender.

“Bartender, apologies for my friend’s lack of class, but he’s canceling that order. He’ll have a Corelian Whiskey Sour,” Jack said.

“Of course, Mr. Flynn,” the robot bartender said, and began mixing the new drink.

“Do I get a say in this?” Kyle asked with a chuckle.

“No, my friend, you do not,” Jack replied flatly. As it turned out, he would not regret it.

A Corelian Whiskey Sour appeared to be no different than a normal Whiskey Sour. However, all the difference was made by the use of Corelian whiskey. Corelian whiskey, combined with being a rye whiskey of the highest quality, is infused with honey, and also, crucially, the pits of an apricot-like fruit which grows only on Corelia.

Kyle’s drink arrived, and with a shrug, he took a long sip. The drink was lightly fruity and both sweet and sour, and in spite of being served on ice, went down as smoothly as warm butter.

Kyle closed his eyes to take it in, savored it, and then opened his eyes.

“Holy shit!” was all he could think of to say.

“Yes indeed. A Corelian virgin! How exciting. I only hope you’re not a normal virgin,” Nadia Wang quipped dryly, to raucous laughs all around.

Kyle eventually managed to relax. He realized that, in spite of his mistrust of Emmermann, this was the safest place for both Max and Andrew.

After a while, everyone grew tired of drinking, and went to wander the house. Kyle found himself in a sitting room, large

and with typical alpine furnishings, and sat to read his copy of Journey to the West. Untranslated and unabridged, it should be noted, so that the book was indeed quite cumbersome. Kyle settled into a massive couch and began reading. It was the most calmness he'd experienced since he was in Okinawa. The footmen and maids occasionally walked through, but otherwise, it was solace.

Eventually, as Kyle sat, he heard the unmistakable sound of a young boy's feet coming towards the sitting room. He looked up to see Max entering.

"Mi Pequeño," he said with a smile, "how was the weapons museum?"

"It was amazing Dad. You'll love it! I've been looking for you everywhere. Emmermann wants us to all wash and dress for dinner," Max said.

"Oh," Kyle said. "Where do we go for that?"

It was only just now occurring to him that they'd brought no luggage, and hadn't been shown to their rooms.

"One of the footmen showed me and Drew," Max said. "Some of the others are already up there. Bit of a hike. You wanna go?"

"It's 'want to,' not 'wanna.' But yes, let's go," Kyle said.

With a roll of his eyes, Max turned to leave, and Kyle followed. It was indeed a "bit of a hike" to the wing of the castle which had the guest rooms, passing back through the grand entry hall, and also some unassuming white double doors that, Max said, housed the weapons museum. Kyle wondered what Emmermann did with all the dozens of rooms they passed. He supposed they must be occupied by the staff, of which there

were quite a few, but even so, he doubted there were enough to justify this much space.

As Max predicted, a number of the bedrooms in the hall they occupied, on the third floor, were already standing open, and the travelers were already settled in. Six of the rooms had plaques on them with their occupant's surname on them. The two Flynns were marked as "Flynn elder" and "Flynn younger." Kyle entered the one labeled "Dellschau," which was directly next to Max's, labeled "Bronsley."

"This room has been readied for some action," Kyle muttered with a slight smile as he entered. The room was grand and stately, with a Turkish theme. The bedsheets were scented with Turkish delight and something else, almost undetectable. Pheromones, Kyle guessed.

Kyle explored his room further. There was a massive mahogany wardrobe, which Kyle found to be filled with many types of clothes, including a full tuxedo, pressed and tailored, as well as a large suitcase. For whenever they left, Kyle guessed. He changed dutifully into the tuxedo, and just a few minutes later, the dinner bell rang. Kyle went into the hall, being met by Jack and a footman, and when the others emerged from their rooms, all smartly dressed except for Max, he beckoned them to follow.

Kyle spoke to Max as they walked.

"Kid, why aren't you in your suit?" he asked.

Max scoffed. "I don't know how to put on shit like that. Emmermann can shove that tuxedo up his ass if he doesn't like it."

Kyle suppressed a smile.

“Watch your language, Kid.” Was all he said, as he silently agreed with the sentiment.

The dining room, as everything in this house, was gargantuan. It was outfitted to look like a huge Norse dining hall. One half expected Grendel to come crashing in at any moment. Emmermann of course sat at the head of the long banquet table, and the party all sat themselves near him, with his grandsons closest on either side of the table. Kyle was observing, with delight, that Max and Andrew were becoming the greatest of friends.

The dinner was relaxed, at least as relaxed as a three-course black tie dinner ever is. Kyle grew bored about halfway through the first course of Lobster Thermidor, and paid only minimal attention to the conversations, which seemed mostly political, and about other things which bored him, such as “wasn’t the gravity on Corelia awful”, the pros and cons of a Martian vacation, and what everyone was planning to do for Walpurgisnacht. Kyle and Nadia eyed each other a few times, knowing what was expected of them later, but they avoided saying anything.

It was as they were making their way through their strawberry ice cream profiteroles with chocolate sauce that Andrew brought up the obvious.

“Grandfather; why are all of us here?” he asked.

Emmermann smiled. “Well my boy, I suppose a worthy question. Truthfully, I hadn’t planned on you and Max being present. That’s a happy incident. However, I have a plan for the adults. That’s all I can say until after the event tomorrow.”

Their dinner eaten, everyone took a glass of whiskey from the end table and returned to their rooms. Kyle simply sat on his bed and awaited Nadia's arrival, then jumped up to meet her when there was a knock at his door.

Kyle drew Nadia in and, closing the door, gave her a long kiss as he began undressing her. It was only when he noticed she wasn't reciprocating that he drew back.

"Everything alright Nadia? Am I going too fast?" Kyle asked.

"No, Mr. Kyle. It's just that I've never done this before. Transactionally, I mean."

"Ah," Kyle said with a grin, "I see. Well you're in good company, as I've done it many times."

And so Kyle and Nadia had their interlude. Nadia left back to her own room, visibly both satisfied and slightly embarrassed, and Kyle took to his bath, which he'd been yearning to soak in since he'd first seen it. The bathroom was a large black and white affair, with a floor of black marble. The bathtub was also black marble, and sank about three feet into the floor. Kyle eagerly started the water and sank into the tub. For all he railed against "decadence," he certainly didn't mind this.

Kyle stayed in his bath for over an hour. Finally, feeling the water cooling down, he rose from the water, patted himself dry, and without bothering to put on a stitch of clothing, walked to the window of his bedroom, opened it, and leaned out.

The night air of Valhalla was cool, and carried the scent of the cedar like trees. Kyle wished he was able to breathe so that he could inhale a deep breath of this mountain air. Emmermann's castle was built a slight ways up the mountain, and

Kyle's room was on the third floor, affording him a splendid view of the valley below. Above, there were two moons, one silver and the other a pale orange. With not a single city light, the stars were visible in all their glory.

Kyle felt the calmest and most free since Okinawa. The nature and magnificent views, as well as the post-coital high, put him in a songwriting mood, as well as an urge to be in nature even more. He searched his room and found a sketchbook and a pencil, which would do quite well for his purposes. He then went out into the hallway and walked to a door that Max had pointed out, which he'd said led to the roofs and ramparts of the castle. So taken was Kyle by this mood that he rather forgot that he was still bare naked.

Upon climbing the stairs, he did find himself on the castle's rampart, which had a terrace of sorts, with several chairs and couches for taking in the views. Kyle sat on one of these couches and wrote the following song. Inspired both by his time with Nadia and by reading Journey to the West, he chose to write it in Chinese. While he wrote the song intending it to be read and sung in Mandarin, the Cantonese translation is all that's publicly available, and so is what I've chosen to include.

Sau hon chaan hung lyun mou
Yik fa dai chou dou fung
Naan gam seui tau leui yung
Chi jai hang yut mung lung

Sau seui yu ho ji hung

Bei oi dou yat yeung tung
Ching yi yu nang wu tung
Seung fan bat bit seung sung

Fong ha sau seui
Gam siu ching nei do jan chung
Na yat chung gin
Ji hung seung gin yik chung chung

Waai leui ching yan joi yun
Seung ngoi pin bat nang yung
Ching yan mou yin dei huk
Sam jam bat yan yan tung

Sau hon chaan hung lyun mou
Yik fa dai cho dou fung
Naan gam seui tau leui yung
Chi jai hang yut mung lung

Sau seui yu ho ji hung
Bei oi do yat yeung tung
Ching yi nang wu tang
Seung fan bat bit seung sung

Fong ha sau seui
Gam siu ching nei do jan chung
Pou yap waai leui
Sam sam yat man mok chung chung

Waai leui ching yan joi yun
Seung ngoi pin bat nang yung
Ching yan mou yin dei huk
Sam jam bat yan yan tung

Fong ha sau seui
Gam siu ching nei do jan chung
Na yat chung gin
Ji hung seung gin yik chung chung

Fong ha sau seui
Gam siu ching nei do jan chung
Pou yap waai leui
Sam sam yat man mok chung chung

His song written, Kyle laid back on the little couch, taking in the incredible views and listening to the sounds of the night birds, who seemed to exist in more varied species on Valhalla than on Earth, judging by the variety of calls that could be heard. Eventually, he fell asleep.

Kyle was awoken by his shoulder being shaken. He opened his eyes to see that the sun had fully risen. He'd slept through the night up here. He looked up to see the footman who had nudged him awake.

"Breakfast is served, Herr Dellschau. I brought you some clothes," he said, holding them out to Kyle in one hand, as if it was every day that he found naked guests lying on the roof, and perhaps it was.

Sheepishly, Kyle took the jeans, shirt, shoes, and underwear he was handed, stood, and dressed. These clothes must have come from the stock Emmermann had put in his closet.

“Right. Breakfast?” he said briskly.

“Right this way, Herr Dellschau,” the footman said, turning. Kyle followed, and they walked down to the ground floor to the breakfast room.

The breakfast room, unlike the massive banquet hall they had eaten in the night before, was small and intimate and wooden, with a delicately embroidered Persian rug on the floor. The room was oblong. Three of the walls were covered with a continuous mural of a European city, and the last wall was taken up mostly by windows. Everyone else was already seated at the small round breakfast table, and Kyle took his own seat, with a nod towards the others, and began helping himself to the foods laid out on the table.

As they ate, Emmermann ordered his glass pad brought in, and after opening it, he began discussing the day’s agenda. As had been promised, there was a large dinner party being held that night, and all were to attend, Kyle specifically as security. There was a long wait, however, as Valhalla has 50 hour days, and the guests weren’t to arrive until the mid evening. Until then, they had their freedom.

After breakfast, Max was very eager that Kyle should see the weapons museum, and so they went. The museum was behind an innocuous looking set of white double doors, with a staircase leading down just beyond it, and into the museum.

Whatever Kyle had expected of the museum, it wasn’t this.

Far from the usual armory found in houses like these, this was a full museum gallery. The walls were white, the floors, a light and reflective wood, and the lighting was bright. The weapons, which counted at least 100, were mounted either on the walls or in glass display cases around the floor, and each one had a small plaque explaining what each one was.

A few of the weapons were recognizable, such as a hydrogen bomb and a Japanese katana, however most were obviously alien. A knife with spinning blade of Draco origin. A huge and oddly shaped silver gun that, according to the plaque, had been built for a 20-foot tall insect man, and so on. Kyle had half expected boredom, but got the opposite. The room enraptured him, and he spent over two hours roaming the museum and looking at the weapons. He was particularly taken by a rounded silver handgun, too big for a normal person, but with Kyle's size and strength, would have been fairly comfortable. The description read; "Ceradean MASER pistol."

After the museum, they regrouped with the others and decided to have a hike and a picnic in the woods. Someone went to the kitchen and returned with a packed basket, and they all set out, into the woods.

Kyle was very impressed with the sheer variety of avian wildlife. There must have been dozens of species of birds, in all the colors of the rainbow, and all larger than the average bird on Earth, due to Valhalla's lighter gravity. It was easy to see why they'd chosen to call this planet "Valhalla." It seemed as close to such a place as could exist in this universe.

At one point as they were out, Nadia was sitting on a rock

away from the others, staring into space. Kyle took the opportunity to speak to her.

"Are you alright?" Kyle asked. "You're not upset about last night are you? I'm not."

Nadia smiled. "No. Nothing to be upset about there, Kyle. It was good. Slightly embarrassing to be paid for it, but good. What I'm worried about is this coming mission. Why is Emmermann saying nothing?"

Kyle gave a thoughtful shrug. "I have no idea. I hope it's not too fucked up, whatever it is."

"As do I."

Eventually, the group realized that the orange sun had passed over the horizon and was beginning its very slow but steady descent. And so they headed back to the castle, with their picnic basket now emptied, to prepare for the promised party. Everyone bathed and put on their nicest clothes. Kyle went next door to Max's room and, after a good deal of arguing on Max's part, convinced him to wear a suit. He then helped him put it on, which resulted in a good deal of swearing from Kyle's part, but it was eventually completed, and everyone went downstairs to await the guests.

As it turned out, they'd rather overestimated the urgency of the situation. They still had several hours before any guests were due to arrive. The staff were setting up, putting up signs to direct guests to the ballroom, and a few were moving the bar to it. Kyle and the others chose not to make themselves useful. They were guests after all, and were growing increasingly disdainful of this entire visit. And so they spent their time

around the house, with Kyle giving Max a songwriting lesson. Kyle was trying to spend as much quality time with his boy as possible.

Eventually, mid evening came, and the guests began to arrive. The alpenhorn players lined the bridge once again. The landing pad became crowded with small shuttles with a few passengers each. The entryway was held open, and one of the footmen stood by the doors with a glass pad, retinal scanning all the guests. Kyle was pacing nearby, as did Emmermann, who had decked himself out in full SS regalia, including a Luger at his hip.

Kyle had been standing around near the door, doing his job, when Nadia approached.

“Kyle,” she said, “there are guests coming up from the basement too. Old man has a jumpgate down there! I need a drink.” And with that she ran off again. Kyle smiled at her behavior.

The guests, Kyle imagined, were all the upper crust of Der Bund society. However, as he wasn’t “in the loop,” he knew very few names. In fact, the only ones he concretely recognized were Brian Foster, Anya Mittelbraun, and Shinji Arasaka Sr. He was able to deduce that the woman hanging off Shinji’s arm was likely his wife, and the two younger Japanese folks who trailed behind them, a woman and a man, were their children, as they walked together in a fashion suited only for a brother and sister who hate each other but are acting civil for the benefit of the family image.

Eventually, the guests seemingly all had arrived, and so Kyle moved to the ballroom, simply watching for any strange or

dangerous behavior. As he observed these guests, in their Armani suits and their Givenchy evening gowns, sipping their champagne and nibbling on their caviar crackers, Kyle became filled with a very particular emotion; disgust. Pure, visceral, unadulterated disgust- at the decadence on display, at Emmermann for condoning and cultivating it, and at the participants whom, he imagined, were mostly Jews and child rapists, or both.

"Horrific, aren't they? I can tell you think so. Written all over your face," a female voice said at Kyle's elbow, speaking English, which stood out at this party.

"Quite so," Kyle said, turning to the voice, which he saw belonged to a middle aged blonde woman, obviously a hybrid with her square jaw and long slender neck.

The woman smiled and held out her hand.

"Lauren Bacall," she said.

"Kyle Dellschau," Kyle replied.

"Yes, I agree. They're insufferable. Precisely why I'm leaving early. But I wanted you to know you aren't alone in the room. Though I suppose you soon will be since I'm leaving now."

"Well, Ms. Bacall," Kyle said, "You're very pretty. I don't suppose I could convince you to step into one of those closets for a moment?"

Lauren Bacall laughed. "No thank you, Mr. Dellschau. But I suppose I appreciate your forwardness. Ta-ta!" And with that, she turned and left, leaving Kyle in a slightly improved mood.

Kyle eventually grew tired of not knowing anyone. Not that he intended to speak to them. He did, however, wish to know

their identities, at least the important ones. And so, he approached the younger Japanese man who had come with the Arasakas, whom he guessed was Shinji's son. Kyle supposed that, as he was an Arasaka product himself, he'd be able to break the ice fairly well, and besides, this younger Arasaka had a welcoming face.

"Evening. I'm Kyle Dellschau. I'm the product of the company owned by the man I believe is your father?" Kyle said upon approaching the young man, who stood near the bar. He saw no point in pretenses, saying exactly what he'd intended, his eyes trained forward, and speaking clear, flawless Japanese.

The young man looked up at Kyle. Quite literally looked up, as Kyle stood at nearly a foot taller than him. He held out his hand.

"Greetings, Mr. Dellschau. Forgive me, but it is very unusual for a product to approach a member of the family in such a direct fashion."

"I'm a very unusual product," Kyle said evenly, not accepting the outstretched hand.

The young man smiled at this.

"I meant no disrespect, Mr. Dellschau. I am Yoshi Arasaka. Pleased to make your acquaintance." At this Kyle accepted the offered handshake.

"What is your reason for speaking to me, Mr. Dellschau? You don't seem like the type to be wasting your time on frivolous bullshit," Yoshi said.

"No. I'm not. I'll get to the point. I want to know who these people are surrounding us. I'm not informed at all. And I want

to change that."

"Very well. But if I might ask, Mr. Dellschau; how are you here if you don't know anyone?"

Kyle shrugged. "I'm security."

"I see," Yoshi said, and began pointing people out. The statuesque copper-blonde in uniform who stood near to Emmermann was his daughter, Viktoria.

The stocky, sandy haired man with the confused looking pregnant redhead clinging to his arm was Theodore Marshall, the largest colonial shipping magnate.

The young woman who had accompanied Yoshi was his sister, Sakura Saimashi, née Arasaka, heir apparent to his father's company. Kyle still had no idea that she was the woman whose husband had been killed in order to allow for Kyle's acquisition.

The handsome, average height brunette man was Gabriel Kruger, the head of Kruger Mercenaries LLC. This was a name Kyle was mildly familiar with, as he'd occasionally seen Kruger Mercenaries LLC posters in a few colonies he'd had missions in. This was his first time seeing the head of the beast, however.

There was the slim, muscular, and greasily handsome looking Spaniard, with a woman on each arm, by the name of Roberto Fernandes, the head of Fernandes Arms, a major producer of plasma guns. Roberto was, according to Yoshi, essentially the ruler of the colony of Nuevo Cartagena, in the constellation Hercules, where he was known by other colonists as "Tío Bobby."

There were other, non-corporate leaders too, who were simply other members of the upper echelon of Der Bund society, or

the society of Sen No Taiyō No Teikoku, the Japanese colonial government. These included Klaus Barbie, regenerated to his prime and now leader of Titan. Masako Nigata, colonial governor of New Kyoto, on Triton. Several members of the Chan family of Centurion. And Salvador Coronado, patriarch of the Martian familia de Coronado, who, Kyle did not yet know, would soon be very meaningful indeed. Notably, there were no Americans, aside from a few spouses and bodyguards.

Yoshi also pointed out a few absentees. Notably not present were Paul Serene and his hangers-on, of Monarch Solutions LTD. Nor were any members of House Daishono, even though they were the only other family with a private home on Valhalla. Both of these absent families were, Yoshi said, enemies of both the Emmermanns and Arasakas.

All in all, a very informative conversation was had between Kyle and Yoshi, and they became, if not friends, at least friendly acquaintances.

Inevitably, the party began winding down. People started running out of energy to dance and chat, or they became too drunk to do either, and had to be carried back to their shuttles. The music, wherever it was coming from, began dying down, and eventually stopped. And so, finally, after many hours, the party ended and the last guests left. In total, it lasted about 16 hours. In Kyle's mind, it lasted for weeks, as it did in the minds of his companions.

By the time it ended, it was early morning of their third day on Valhalla, and time for their assignment. Kyle and Jack sent Max and Andrew to bed, in no uncertain terms, then the adults

decided to go confront Emmermann in his office. He was in a very good mood, fueled by many whiskey and sodas and having had sex with multiple women at the party. So, they decided the risk was worth it. They approached, and Georg knocked firmly.

"Who is it?" Emmermann's voice echoed.

"Your long-suffering employees. And your son. Who else?" Georg said. He spoke in a good natured but firm tone, with a touch of accusation.

"Come in." And so they did.

"What is it?" Emmermann asked cheerily, looking up from his glass pad.

"We've come to see about our assignment, Mr. Emmermann. It's been three days, and we've just had a very long night," Nadia said, in her innocent and beseeching way that always melted men.

"Yes, I suppose so. As it happens, I was just seeing to it," Emmermann replied, rising to stand and laying his glass pad on the table. "Please, come look."

Everyone crowded around the desk and glass pad, and a briefing followed. Essentially, they were being sent to Mars in the mid 1950s, to a colony, to infiltrate the then-budding interstellar weapons trade, and build Emmermann's empire further, by bringing Salvador Coronado and his ilk into the fold. Their assignment was expected to last for at least a Martian year, from their end. They'd be issued with weapons and of course glass pads to stay in touch, and that would be that.

"How long will have passed on Valhalla when we return?" Kyle asked, remembering that Emmermann's stargates did not

have the instantaneous quality of the portal at Camp Hero.

"About one week, Valhalla time. Longer on Terra of course, given that Valhalla has 50 hour days," Emmermann said. "I suppose you had all better go pack up and say your goodbyes."

Everyone left to do so. However, Kyle doubled back halfway down the hall, and reentered Emmermann's office.

"Ah, Kyle," Emmermann said without looking up, "did you lose something?"

"No. As a matter of fact I came to seek something. From you."

"Oh?" Emmerman said, still not looking up.

"Yes. I want an agreement. Nothing formal, I don't trust bureaucracy. I'm looking for a word, from gentleman to gentleman. I want your word that if anything should happen to me, Max will be looked after." Kyle uttered these words evenly, firmly, and with a regular tone and pace. He didn't beg or show emotion. He simply got the point across.

At last Emmermann looked up.

"Kyle," he said, "Max's being looked after is the last thing you need ever worry about. Max is my Ark of the Covenant. I've never told you this, but he's the oldest of my grandchildren. When I finish my cycle, my eldest daughter will inherit. And then when she is gone, Max will inherit. I've had Max in your care all this time so that he would be almost guaranteed to survive. And as long as you're alive, that is where he will remain. You have my word on that as a businessman and a gentleman."

Kyle paused. Then he turned towards the door, stopping with his hand on the door handle, and looked back, making full eye

contact with Emmermann.

“Well. I hope that both of us believe that,” Kyle said, and then left.

Emmermann had the power of persuasion, but Kyle was a synthetic and immune to it, at least from someone like Emmermann, though he was still inclined to believe the core of these words.

Kyle reached his room, finding that the others were already in theirs, packing to leave, and so Kyle did the same. There wasn’t much luggage. Only a single handheld leather suitcase and a single green rucksack, the latter of which was no doubt meant for the supplies they had not yet received. Kyle quickly packed his suitcase, then went next door to Max’s room and entered. He found Max walking around, rather than in bed as he’d expected.

“Hey Kid. I hoped you’d still be asleep,” Kyle said, walking towards Max.

“I had to piss. Is that allowed?” Max said, in a groggy and irritated tone.

Kyle chose to ignore that snide comment and instead got on a knee to face Max at eye level.

“Mi Pequeño, listen. I have to go on my mission now. You and Andrew will be staying here at the castle,” Kyle said.

“I figured that, Dad. Is this different from a normal mission?”

“Well, slightly. Your grandfather’s method of time travel isn’t as snappy as the one used at Camp Hero. Don’t ask me why. But at any rate, it means you and Andrew will be at the

castle for a Valhallan week, which is approximately two Earth weeks." Kyle explained.

"So I'll be here alone with my best friend in the castle on the paradise planet for two weeks? Sounds terrible," Max said sarcastically, but he smiled.

Kyle opened his arms.

"Come here Kid," he said, and to his surprise, Max did so and warmly reciprocated Kyle's hug.

"I love you, you little shit," Kyle said, holding Max close. "While I'm gone, don't forget what I taught you."

"It's only a fortnight Dad. And I love you too," Max said.

"Alright Max," Kyle said, pulling away and fighting back tears. "I'll get you a steak dinner when I'm back. And I'd tell you to watch your language, but I doubt your foul mouthed old bastard of a grandfather cares."

"I'm in a castle of luxury. I can just order a steak. But thank you. See you soon," Max said.

"See you soon, Kid," Kyle said, turning at last and leaving. He met the others in the hallway, and they all marched down into the basement.

This was their first time seeing the basement, which, in stark contrast to the old world charm of the house above, was sleek and white and bright. In the center stood a stargate, circular and steel, about 12 feet in height. Along one wall sat a long black desk, and behind it stood Emmermann and a robot much like the one who served as a bartender in the house above. The robot was laying out supplies and glass pads on the desk, and so the group approached, opening their rucksacks as they walked

up.

“What’s up with these glass pads?” Georg asked, upon picking his up. The tablets they were being issued were noticeably smaller than those they were used to, and had a thin metal frame around the edges.

“Older models. More period appropriate,” Jack explained.

Aside from the glass pads, they were issued a few other things for Martian survival. These included some capsules to raise body temperature, a few instant injecting syringes to raise blood oxygenation levels, a few small books on Martian flora and fauna and Martian survival (which, they noted, had all been printed in the late 40s and early 50s), a device which looked like a large thermos with three chambers, (which the robot explained was a small food replicator), and a few other typical survival accoutrements.

They were also each given a single gun. This gun resembled a WWII Luger, however it was clearly made in a larger caliber, and most crucially, it was a plasma gun, with approximately 200 shots. These were given to them in leg holsters which they easily concealed underneath the cargo pants they all wore.

Their bags loaded up and their guns fastened, the group turned towards the stargate. The gate had already been opened, and was glowing a pale sea foam green. No one could see the other side. They knew they were to claim the status of colonist arrivals. In the period they were entering in, this would not be questioned, they were told, and so they went through the gate.

They found themselves in the desert, as one might expect. However, there was a definite chill in the air, even though it was

clearly midday, and the sun shone very brightly indeed.

“Home. I’d almost forgotten what she looked like,” Jack said with a smile, sounding and looking the most peaceful that Kyle had ever seen him.

While the rocky and sandy desert terrain was far from even, it was generally flat enough that large protrusions could be seen, and there were quite a few. To the north and east, about 35 miles (56 kilometers) away, according to the topographic reading on the glass pads, was a monstrous mountain rising to meet the sky. Olympus Mons, according to Jack. And to the south and east, only about half a mile (800 meters) away was a settlement rising from the sand. The settlement appeared fairly small, surrounded by a concrete wall, with a blue force field dome over top and only a few tall buildings sticking up.

“Well. That must be our destination. Let’s get to it,” Kyle said. “And remember, German only.”

They had gone perhaps 50 yards before Nadia began coughing.

“Sorry. Thin air,” she said, sitting on a rock.

“Did you take your oxygen pill?” Jack asked.

Rolling his eyes, Kyle opened his rucksack and pulled out his own bottle. Being that he didn’t breathe, they were useless to him.

“Here,” he said impatiently. “Won’t do very much good now, but it’s better than nothing. Learn to listen next time.”

Nadia snatched the bottle from Kyle’s hand defiantly.

“You don’t need to be an asshole, Kyle.” Nadia said.

“He’s right,” Jack piped in. “He’s not the asshole. This planet

is the asshole. If you don't listen to what you're told as to how to stay alive, then you're dead on Mars. Case in point, if we don't get to that settlement before dark, we'll likely be spider food or be sniped by a patrol. So take your damn pill and move it."

With an ugly look at both Jack and Kyle, Nadia swallowed the large pale blue tablet and stood, roughly thrusting the bottle back at Kyle.

"Perfect. Now let's move," Georg said decisively.

They marched for nearly an hour, it turned out, deliberately going fairly slowly, partly for Nadia's sake, but also because they were eyeing for patrols, which they knew were a very serious threat. Eventually, they reached the concrete wall of the settlement.

"Now we look for a gate," Jack said. "And hope we're let in."

This was a daunting prospect. The settlement was clearly several miles in diameter, and Nadia was slowly but surely becoming hypoxic. Kyle eventually began halfway carrying her, and they wound up walking nearly a mile before reaching the gate. This gate was a force field, much like the one that covered the top of the colony. Beyond it was a concrete corridor, which no doubt led to the settlement, but was angled in such a way that it couldn't be seen. Indeed, there were no signs of life at that moment.

"Shit!" Jack screamed. "We're stuck out here!"

He was wrong. Within just a few seconds, an alarm began blaring. A horrific blaring alarm, varying in pitch like a siren.

"Halt! Put your hands in the air! Prepare to be searched! Put

all bags on the ground!" A harsh robotic male voice barked in German.

Everyone obeyed these orders.

Almost instantly, a few pieces of the concrete wall surrounding the settlement slid open. These were actually panel doors, laid in so seamlessly that they were invisible until opened. From the doors, which were on either side of the force field gate, came a group of soldiers.

These soldiers were clad head to toe in black power armor, with even their faces obscured by the reflective lenses on their helmets. They all had large black tanks on their backs, presumably of optimal air. They wielded huge black rifles which looked to have been modeled after the Sturmgewehr, save for the magazines being circular and having wires which connected to the bodies of the guns.

"Everybody line up! Hands up! Spread your fucking legs!" one of the soldiers bellowed.

"Everyone listen to them. They're our friends, remember?" Jack said, sending out a telepathic message to the group.

They complied, and as they were being patted down, Nadia feigned collapse, leaning on the soldier who was searching her. Whether this was genuine or strategic is unknown, but either way, it occurred before anyone's guns were discovered.

"Come on, Boys, are you really going to keep the pretty girl out here in the thin air? She's not used to these oxygen levels. And she forgot to take her oxygen pill. Women, am I right?" Kyle said, with a slight grin. If Norma Jean had taught him anything, it was this; play to your audience.

“Isn’t she? And just what the fuck is she used to? Where are all you from?” Demanded the same soldier who had barked at them initially.

“Neu Dresden,” Jack piped in, without missing a beat. Apparently he’d planned for this. “There’s just been an incursion there. Surely you’ve heard about it? We were just barely able to throw our survival goods into a bag, plus a few changes of clothing and come through a gate owned by a friend of ours.”

“How convenient. I bet they’re Americans. Captain, let’s just kill them now!” one of the soldiers, a female, said.

“Take it easy,” another, likely the captain who’d been addressed, said. “Do they look like Americans to you? Do they have American accents? No. We’re taking them inside. Everyone, follow us.”

“Before we do, there’s something you should know,” Kyle said, taking a calculated risk.

“And what is that?” the captain demanded.

“We have guns,” Kyle said calmly. “Look on our legs under our pants.”

They were searched, and the guns calmly taken. Apparently this was normal, and it was a good thing Kyle had made the confession. Indeed, it might well have saved their lives. And so they were marched into the colony, with the force field gate parting open when they approached, presumably due to there being some kind of unseen recognition system. As they’d been patted down, their bags had also been searched, and returned to them.

Beyond the force field and around the curve of the concrete

corridor, they at last entered the colony proper, which turned out to be rather remarkable. The buildings were large, white, and bulbous, and obviously modular. Convenient, in case it was ever necessary to move the colony. The streets had been smoothed out, but were unpaved. A few hovering cars were parked around on the streets. These cars looked much like desert ATVs, however the cabs were fully sealed, save for some small vents, likely for filtering the Martian air and making it breathable when one was outside the colony. There were few signs of life on this street, however in the distance, one could plainly hear the sounds of town life.

"Wilkommen ins Neu Berlin!" the captain exclaimed proudly.

The colony itself, of course, had breathable air, and Nadia began perking up almost immediately when they entered, shaking off the soldier who'd been carrying her. They walked only a short ways up the street, stopping in front of one of the modular buildings.

"Here's our combined doctor and registrar," the captain said. "It's a bit late, but I'm sure he'll see you."

The building, which was single story, squat, and bulbous, had its front door open, with several foldable steps leading up to the door. The room was sleek and white. Along one wall ran a long curved desk, and along the other, some gray folding chairs. At the far side opposite the door into the building was another opening, which connected to a tubular hallway, beyond which were no doubt more modular rooms.

Behind the desk sat a single nurse. She was tall and had fiery

red hair, and was dressed in the typical nurse's uniform of the 1940s. She stood immediately when the travelers and the soldier entered.

"We have new arrivals! Is the doctor in to register them? I have to return to my sentry duty," the captain said.

"Yes, Captain Weber," she said, and without another word, the captain of the sentries left, and Kyle and his companions were on their own.

The nurse rounded the desk and extended her hand. "Good afternoon. I'm Helene. I'm Dr. Stahl's nurse. You all need registration?"

Before any of the men had a chance to respond, and no doubt begin flirting with the pretty nurse, Nadia stepped forward and took Helene's outstretched hand. "Yes. We're from Neu Dresden. I suppose this is where we come for our registrations?"

"Yes. Terrible about the incursion on your planet. What was it like?"

There were a few seconds of silence before Jack volunteered with; "We didn't see much. We were hiding when it began and we left without looking much."

"I see," Helene said, rounding her desk and producing a glass pad, small and with a metal frame, much like the ones the team were carrying.

"All sign here. Dr. Stahl is with a patient at the moment. He'll do the tests when he's through with her, and you all can be on your way. Please have a seat. I'm sorry I can't offer refreshments. It's not like Neu Dresden; water is very tight here."

Everyone signed the glass pad. Kyle was testing a plan, and so signed with his real name. He was unable to see what the others signed, which was slightly nerve wracking, however they did all sign. They had no real choice. This done, they all took their seats in the row of folding chairs along the wall opposite the curved desk.

There were a number of magazines sitting out for those in the waiting area. These were mostly Martian lifestyle type magazines. While they would no doubt be fascinating to a reader on Earth, and given the time period this happened in, would be valuable historical relics, in the moment, they were unremarkable, and so I cannot relate the content. And anyway, no one was actually reading. The situation was too tense. As they were sitting, Kyle decided to speak to Jack, telepathically of course.

Kyle: “Where did that Neu Dresden cover story come from? Were you told that before we left?”

Jack: “It’s simple. It’s currently spring on Mars, and the year is 1955. I think choosing that cover was a test from my father.”

Kyle: “It’s always another fucking test with him, isn’t it? Will he never stop?”

Jack: “He’s trying to train us, Kyle. He gives us the best, so he wants us to be the best.”

Kyle: “I’m sorry that you believe that.”

It wasn’t long before Dr. Stahl came walking down the tubular hallway, with an older woman in tow. The woman cast an inquisitive look at the newcomers as she passed, but said nothing before leaving.

Dr. Stahl looked like a man befitting his name, Kyle thought. He was over 50, stocky, with jet black hair and large round glasses of a very high prescription. His thick black mustache made him look rather more Hispanic than Germanic. He walked up to Helene, who handed him the glass pad containing the newcomers' names, and he turned to the group.

"Fresh blood," he said appreciatively, reading the list of names. "I see no particular order. I'll go from the top then. Miss Nadine Zhang?"

Nadia stood at this. Apparently she'd chosen to use a false name. Jack also had, choosing to call himself David Müller, as when this name was called, he was the one who stood, after Nadia exited, having been in the office for under 15 minutes. She gave an almost imperceptible but reassuring nod. Jack gave the same nod when he returned. So far, so good. Kyle was called next, and walked to the back with Dr. Stahl.

Kyle and the doctor went down the short tubular hallway, to another large, round, modular room. This one had been set up into a doctor's office. A desk and chair with a few medical implements on it, a sink, and a hospital bed.

"It seems the records of all of you were lost in the incursion on Neu Dresden. Typical. I'll need some information," Dr. Stahl said, pulling out his glass pad from his desk.

Stahl: "Please state your name for the record."

Kyle: "Kyle Dellschau."

Stahl: "Citizenship?"

Kyle: "Der Bund Freier Deutscher Welten."

This had been Kyle's plan. With his name now in the system,

and recorded as a citizen of Der Bund, he had now effectively attained citizenship for himself.

Stahl: “What is your race?”

Kyle: “Aryan.”

Stahl: “What is your ethnicity?”

Kyle: “German.”

Stahl: “What is your native dialect?”

Kyle: “Sachsisch.”

Stahl: “What was your profession prior to emigrating?”

Kyle: “Weapons repair.”

Kyle had pulled this answer out of nowhere. However it seemed useful, since he was to be dealing with weapons smugglers.

Stahl: “Are you sexually functioning and active?”

Kyle: “Yes.”

Stahl: “When was your last copulation?”

Kyle: “I fail to see how this is relevant.”

Stahl: “Just answer the question please, Herr Dellschau.”

Kyle: “Within the past week.”

Stahl: “Have you any serious health concerns?”

Kyle: “No.”

With that, Stahl set down his glass pad and looked up.

“Right, Herr Dellschau. I need to examine you now. Please strip down.”

A fairly standard medical exam followed, where the doctor took Kyle’s vitals, tested his reflexes, and generally picked him over in the usual way. Trouble came momentarily at the end of the examination, when from his desk, Dr. Stahl began pulling

the implements for a blood test. Kyle knew that this could not go through. His "blood" was a nanite and chemical mixture of Arasaka origin, and contained no biological material.

"Fuck you. You're not coming near me with that needle!" Kyle said, crossing his arms and backing away. He had decided on an act already.

"But I must, Herr Dellschau. It's policy," Dr. Stahl said with a patronizing smile, walking towards Kyle.

"I said stay back!" Kyle screamed. "Those American fucks put needles in me! No one will ever put needles in me again!"

Kyle had chosen the act of one with war based PTSD. In this society, he reasoned, it must be worth something. And it turned out, he was correct.

Dr. Stahl calmly put the cap back on his syringe.

"I see, Herr Dellschau. I'll make an exception for you. I'll just take a few of your hairs. Can you accept that?"

Kyle paused. Well, he surmised, his hair grew in the same way as a human's did. It must be biological. So he simply nodded.

Dr. Stahl, with the same patronizing smile, opened his desk once again and pulled out a small blue plastic box with a number of buttons on the top. From this, he pulled a glass test tube with a screw-on top, approached Kyle, pulled a few hairs from Kyle's head, placed them in the tube, and placed the tube back in the box. He then closed the lid of the box and pressed several buttons, and no more than 30 seconds later, the box beeped and a small green light on the top switched on.

"You're approved," Dr. Stahl said. "You may get dressed and

return to the waiting area. If the last of your friends is approved, you'll all be able to apply for housing."

Still putting on his show of being shaken, Kyle dressed and left. Georg was called next and last, (having also used his real name) and he also was approved. From behind the desk, Helene pulled a map, and directed the group to a spot two blocks north, which she said were the offices for new immigrants, where they could be directed to accommodation and to be registered to find employment. And so they went.

Neu Berlin turned out to be rather fascinating to look at. Kyle, for his part, had never seen anything quite like it. The inhabitants of Neu Berlin seemed to have perfected modular living. The small buildings, while they appeared to have come purely white from the factories, had been painted in all the colors of the rainbow by the residents. Out of the windows hung many plants, which were all artificial, upon inspection, but still served to bring some vibrancy. The buildings themselves were quite impressively assembled as well. The modules were all either round, as Dr. Stahl's office had been, or rectangular, and were connected to each other either via tubular hallways, or were stacked and made reachable by foldable metal staircases leading up to each door.

All this modularity led to a certain feeling, one that was difficult to pin down immediately, but was obvious when one figured it out; impermanence. Nomadism. This town was built and designed to be moved at a moment's notice, and no doubt had been.

In addition to the movable buildings, there were a small

number of blocky stucco buildings, which were also clearly not built to last. It was one of these that Kyle and his companions entered. The building was single story, rectangular, small, and had been painted turquoise. A white and blue sign above the entryway read “Einwanderung.”

The inside proved even more rudimentary in appearance than the outside. It was unpainted, and lit by a generator in one corner, into which some string lights had been plugged and then hung along the ceiling. Folding metal chairs were strewn about on the concrete floor, and against one wall was a single metal desk, with a monitor and several other electronic devices atop. Behind it sat a single blonde male soldier, dressed in a tan infantryman’s uniform.

The soldier stood and beckoned the newcomers, saying to come one at a time. And so they did, with Kyle going first. The process was thus; the soldier would first take down the person’s name, type it into his computer, and once it was pulled up in the system (presumably from Dr. Stahl’s office), he would grab what looked like a shrunken Graflex camera from a desk, which had a wire coming out of it. He would next plug it into the computer, take a photo of the subject, then take what looked like a blank white card from his desk, and place it, in turn, in the various electronic boxes of various colors on his desk. When it completed its journey, which took only about three minutes, it would be a functional identity card.

This card read “Marsianer-Heimat-Ausweis” at the top. It contained the picture of the new immigrant, as well as their basic information, such as age, race, native dialect, profession,

and other such things. According to the immigration soldier, this card was their one-size-fits-all pass to Neu Berlin and all other Der Bund settlements on Mars. It was to hold their information, as well as their credits for luxury goods, and also their basic currency which they'd receive once they were gainfully employed. The credits were to be issued for good behavior.

This system was rather interesting for Kyle, having visited several Martian colonies a few decades after the 1950s, with this system no longer being in place by that point. What was outdated for Martians was now new to Kyle. The life of a time traveler encapsulated.

When all the cards had been issued, the immigration officer pulled up a map on his monitor and, after entering everyone's information yet again, found them accommodation. They were to share four single occupancy stacked capsules, on a street near the center of town. He looked rather apologetic at prescribing them this address, but didn't say why, and merely took their glass pads and plugged them into his monitor for a few seconds, downloading a detailed map of Neu Berlin onto each of them, and sending them on their way, with a final warning- they were all considered reserve military now.

As they were leaving, Georg turned back to the officer. "Our guns. We were carrying guns when we came. How would we reacquire them?"

The officer shrugged. "You'll need to take that up with the colonial sergeant-at-arms and fill out the paperwork. Now, on your way please. It's past time for me to close up."

And so they left, pulling up the maps on their glass pads and

walking to the address given, 125 Bismarck Sraße. Everything in Neu Berlin was a short walk in those days, when it was hardly more than a square mile in size, with a population of less than 3,000.

It was as they reached the area that Bismarck Straße was placed in that they saw why the immigration officer had seemed so apologetic about housing them in this area; it was not a "good" neighborhood. It was more of a red light district. The streets were lined with small bars, from which rather racy music was pumping, and many women of unambiguous profession were strolling to and fro. Kyle and the other men were all propositioned, and at least once, Nadia was offered a job. They all diplomatically passed these offers. It was by then early nighttime.

125 Bismarck Straße was about what had been expected. 10 of the round modules had been stacked, and a winding metal staircase had been set up to connect these modules. The bottom module served as the landlady's office, and it looked much the same as the reception area at Dr. Stahl's office- a single desk running along one half, and a few chairs against the other. The landlady stood, simply took each of the newcomer's cards, and scanned them with what looked like a product scanner at a modern supermarket. This gave them access to their apartments, which were numbers six through nine, going from bottom to top. These were the top-most inhabited apartments, with the tenth being a shower block.

Their cards scanned, they all went up to their assigned flats. Kyle's was the eighth, and he was above Nadia and below Jack,

with Georg at the bottom. The modules had card swiping devices mounted beside the doors, which granted access to the apartment.

Kyle shuddered at their interiors, which were all identical. The apartments were all white on the inside, with no trace of decoration. Jutting from one wall was a bed with white sheets and a dark green comforter. Set into one wall was a television screen, which curved along with the wall, and a small white couch, built into the floor, sat opposite the television. At the far end of the module were two closets- one for hanging clothes in, and the other with a toilet. Running along most of the right wall was a white countertop, at the end of which was what appeared to be a toaster oven with a touchscreen, mounted on another block jutting from the wall. Just to the left of the door was a control panel, where one could control the lighting, the temperature, the television, and so on.

Kyle placed his bags on the bed, and turned his attention to the odd toaster oven looking device. Georg entered just then, and saw Kyle attempting to fiddle with the device.

“That’s a replicator,” Georg said. “I hope you don’t mind eating your own shit.”

“Excuse me?” Kyle said, only half listening, and realizing that the slot underneath the touchscreen must be for his universal colonial card, which he then inserted.

“Surely you’ve noticed,” Georg continued, “that there’s no plumbing? No pipes connecting these modules to the ground, no septic tanks, no water towers, no sinks in the toilets. That’s because every module with a toilet in it also has a replicator.

The toilet flushes with air and brings the waste into this here box under the replicator, which breaks it down and changes the molecules into something approaching food."

Kyle turned and stared incredulously at Georg.

"You're fucking with me, old friend." Kyle said with a smile. But it wasn't returned.

"No, Kyle. I'm not. Try and get that replicator to make you something now. It won't do it, because there's nothing in the tank. Then try it again the next time you take a shit. It'll work then. Just try it Kyle." Georg said flatly.

Kyle shuddered again. He found himself grateful that he had no need for food or water, if what Georg said was to be believed.

"Communism. Jewish fucking communism! Here of all places!" was all Kyle could think of to say.

Georg left, and Kyle decided to continue looking over the apartment. He discovered there was a reason why there was no laundry, and it was because the wardrobe had a function whereby it would sonically cleanse the contents of the closet. The toilet flushed with a jet of air, and would also clean its subject with air and sonic jets. Kyle guessed that one was meant to clean their hands in the toilet, as there was no sink in the apartment anywhere.

Kyle finally went up to the supposed shower block. He found that it was divided down the middle, with men to the left and women to the right, and there was barely enough room to walk down the hall. Kyle entered the men's side, and found the "showers." This turned out to be a single long, white room, running the length of the module. Along the dividing wall was a

single bench, protruding from the wall itself. On the opposite side of the room was the “shower” itself, which was a long row of vents on the ceiling. The floor underneath these vents consisted of a grate. In the middle of the wall was a large red button.

Above the bench was a handy pictogram of instructions. The procedure was apparently very simple; strip naked, leave one’s clothes on the bench, hit the red button, and stand under the vents, for what Kyle could only assume was another sonic cleansing, this one full body. In spite of his general disdain, it turned out that the sonic shower was actually very pleasant. It felt like a deep, if very brief, full body massage.

When the shower was over, Kyle donned his clothes once again, and walked out onto the outside staircase which linked the stacked modules. As he always seemed to do on Mars, he found himself looking to the sky. And as always, it proved incredible. Kyle longed to see and experience it with his view unblocked by this force field, and his ears uncontaminated by this noisy and soulless town. Eventually, he drifted back to his apartment, and attempted to sleep.

In spite of the long day he’d had, Kyle wasn’t the least bit sleepy, and indeed it wasn’t as if his body truly needed sleep. The sounds of nightlife kept him awake for some time, and when they died down, they came to be followed by another sound entirely; distant shelling and artillery fire, and the bangs of hurried, heavy-booted footsteps on the street below. Kyle got up and went to the staircase, looking down to see a small procession of soldiers, clad in all black, marching to the south,

where there was no doubt a gate. To the south, and also to the northeast, in the direction of Olympus Mons, one could see battles raging. Distant, but still visible. And to this, Kyle returned to bed.

In the morning, when Kyle awoke and dressed, he opened his door to find that a newspaper had been placed by his door. The "Marschianer Morgenrufer." No points for originality, Kyle thought. On the front page was a list of perhaps a dozen names, alongside addresses and brief causes of death. Kyle and his companions had been thrust into that dark period of Martian colonial history where one would awake in the morning and get one's morning paper in order to read a list of one's neighbors who had died in the night, either due to having been called to the front and killed, or due to what were referred to as "breaches of atmosphere."

The term "breaches of atmosphere" could have many meanings, Kyle would learn. It could mean someone who had left the force field bubble, been unable to reenter, and died of exposure, which happened often, due to claustrophobia, parents trying to say goodbye to their mobilized children, and other such cases. It could also be due to the fact that the bubble itself often was breached in places, due to shelling, and was occasionally off altogether, either due to the fact that the town walls which contained the bubble's mechanism were shelled, or simply due to power cuts. Failure of the bubble inevitably resulted in deaths, either due to artillery, or again due to exposure. Kyle found himself glad that Max wasn't in this environment.

Everyone dressed and regrouped in Georg's apartment. A

unanimous decision was reached; stay dynamic, and stay alive. Stagnation was not an option. They must immediately begin to find their way to the Coronado family. The problem was, they didn't know how to do this. Kyle had, in a way, placed himself as head of this mission, and the others seemed to fall in line. And so Kyle made the executive decision that they must begin by reacquiring their weapons.

The unit gathered a few basic necessities and left their apartment, to find the sergeant-at-arms, whomever and wherever they might be. When they emerged onto the street, they saw that life had begun once again. As people were still learning which of their neighbors had been killed in the night, they were reopening their shops and starting towards their jobs. This was Martian colonial living in the 1950s; living among and upon the dead.

Kyle and his companions only had to ask a few people on the streets in order to find the office and name of the current sergeant-at-arms. Her name was Ella Steinitz, and her office was near the south gate, and apparently unmissable, due to it having a massive Der Bund flag hanging from its front.

Kyle and the others walked in the direction of the south gate, following the directions on their glass pads. Eventually, they entered the neighborhood that the sergeant-at-arms's office was in. This neighborhood was noticeably different. Same modular buildings, however it had a much more official, political air. Very few, if any modules were painted, and there were none of the cheerful artificial plants common elsewhere in the colony. The main decorations here were propaganda signboards. The

most common ones were the rows of soldiers standing against a Martian sunset, which read “Verbinden Marsianer Heimschild!” Another common one was a drawing of a strawberry blonde woman in a spacesuit with an armful of produce, the caption reading “Arbeite hart gegen Kälte und Hunger!”

Adding to the official feeling was that in this district, most of the individuals striding around wore uniforms. The advice to look for a flag had apparently been facetious, as virtually every module had a flag of varying size, either on its roof or on its side.

They were considering asking one of the soldiers they were passing when they saw it- a module, much like any other, save for the fact that this one was on stilts, raising it to approximately 15 feet off the ground. A set of folding metal stairs had been set up, leading to the door. From the rail of the landing at the top of these stairs, a Der Bund flag had been hung. This flag was so massive that it very nearly reached the ground. The group stared at it for a few seconds, in all its massive, icy glory.

“Right. This must be the place,” Jack said, and began up the steps. The others followed suit.

The door to the module stood ajar, so they all entered. This module was set up into an office, and even had a proper wooden desk set up. Behind the desk was a white swivel chair, and on it sat was a woman, presumably sergeant-at-arms Steinitz.

The sergeant-at-arms was seated with her back turned. However, that was enough for all to observe that she was dressed in full SS uniform, and had long blonde hair swept back into a simple and practical ponytail. She was speaking into

what appeared to be a wall-mounted rotary telephone. Kyle wondered how it was possible that this phone was functional. There were no telephone lines in the colony, nor were there any observable radio or cell towers or satellite dishes. Whatever the case, sergeant-at-arms Steinitz was having quite a difficult time with the person on the other end.

“I don’t want any more goddamn excuses! Just make it happen!” she spat into the phone, before slamming down the receiver and spinning in her chair to face her visitors.

The sergeant-at-arms had a very sharp, angular, unmistakably Nordic face, and ice blue eyes. This, combined with her long limbs and long neck, made her into an Aryan beauty. The men all suppressed their initial instincts, and Jack stepped forward.

“Sergeant-at-arms Steinitz?” he said, extending his hand.

“Yes. And you all don’t look like the captain I called an hour ago. What do you want?”

“We’re your newest arrivals. We had our guns confiscated yesterday. We’d like the paperwork to get our guns back,” someone said.

“Would you now? Well, how convenient for me. I have six deaths of soldiers to deal with from last night, and a population of mothers bent on rioting because their boys keep dying, apparently unaware that we’re at fucking war. And because of the war, I have barbarians practically at my gate, and I’m faced with the prospect of having to move my colony for the third time in two months. But yes, you’d like your guns back.” was Steinitz’s reply.

Jack apparently had an inspiration.

Jack: “Well. You certainly seem to have your hands full, fleet captain.”

Steinitz: “I’m not a fleet captain, Herr?”

Jack: “Müller, at the moment. Tomorrow it may change. And you’re correct, you’re not fleet captain yet. But you will be. On the Gregorian date of April 10, 1976, you’ll be promoted, after 10 years of being captain of the Mecklenburg. But that’s something I can’t prove.”

Steinitz: “Is there any point to this?”

Jack: “Well, I think that you providing us with our guns would be good for your future.”

Steinitz: “And how would you know anything about my future? You’ve said nothing provable.”

Jack: “No. I know about your past as well. You were raised in a little Hessian village. You have a sister, Magda. Or I should say had. You protected her all throughout the war in Europe, after which you, she, your parents, and your younger brother left Earth. But you couldn’t protect her here, two years ago, during the Battle of the Gods Tower. Need I continue?”

Steinitz, visibly shaken, stood from her desk to look Jack in the eye.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Nobody. Just making sure things happen as they should,” Kyle said.

Steinitz’s eyes narrowed. “You’re time travelers, aren’t you? Which means you’re above my pay grade.”

“Yes, most likely,” Nadia quipped.

“Look. I have a war to fight,” Steinitz said. “I’ll get you your guns. And you all have 24 hours to leave Neu Berlin permanently. You don’t like it, take it up with my superiors. After you leave. Am I understood?”

“Loud and clear,” Jack said with a patronizing smile. “Now, how about those guns?”

With obvious reluctance, but resolve, Steinitz returned to her phone and called the sentries captain, the same one as the crew had met the day before. Today however, he wore no helmet when he came to Steinitz’s office. He was very pale, his eyes an unusual shade of hazel, and his hair an even more unusual shade of auburn. He looked a good deal younger than his voice or rank would have indicated.

As the captain entered, Kyle looked into his mind. He caught a telepathic order from Steinitz to the captain. The captain was not to speak to the newcomers, nor even to give them their guns directly. He was to place them on Steinitz’s desk and then leave. And so he did.

“Your countdown period begins now. You have 24 hours to get the fuck out of my colony,” Steinitz said. “And maybe five seconds to get the fuck out of my office. I don’t want to ever see you again. If you try anything in your remaining time in my colony, I will know. Now leave.”

They left, having placed their guns on their legs, as the guns were still in their holsters.

“I’m starving. Can we please have breakfast before we leave?” Nadia begged as they started down the road from Steinitz’s office.

“Sure. And as we eat, we can ruminate on how our bastard ‘friend’ here got us booted from the colony before we know where to go!” Georg said, giving Jack a sharp smack on the back. A friendly looking gesture, but the tone was decidedly not friendly.

The group stumbled onto a rather impressive looking restaurant. It was in one of the large, open-fronted stucco buildings, in a more commercial cluster of streets. The restaurant itself was a long row of stacked replicators, with food prepared in them, in the style of an automat. At every outlet was a slot to insert one’s card. If one was authorized to receive the food item, the door would open. If not, then the card was ejected.

As it happened, Kyle stood next to Jack, as they were lining up to get their food. Kyle leaned over.

“So, how did you know so much about our lovely sergeant-at-arms?”

Jack chuckled. “As it happens, I sleep with her in 25 years. Be quite a shock for her to see me then, I’m sure. Although she doesn’t ever admit to recognizing me.”

They sat and ate. The food was positively vile, as is typical of replicator food, particularly from models of that period. They discussed their next move, half out loud, half telepathically.

Georg: “Alright Jack. You’ve had your fun. Where the fuck do we go from here?”

Jack: “My friend, you act as if I had no plan or knowledge before I took this course of action.”

Nadia: “Well spit it out. We don’t have all fucking day.”

Jack: “Based on the time period we’re in, and on what I know

about conditions in this time, the Coronado family are almost certainly in the colony of Elysium right now. Cluster of craters well to the southeast of here where all the rich fucks have their homes."

Kyle: "All very well. Now how do you propose we get there, in the next 24 hours?"

Jack: "We need a vehicle. One of those desert cars like we've seen parked around here will do nicely. It's a four day journey, and we'll have to gather more supplies for survival. But it can be done. This is what we're good at, remember?"

Georg: "And we get this vehicle how? We have no credits, and no valuables with which to make a bribe."

Kyle: "Isn't it obvious? We steal it. Only problem is the tracking system. Not to mention the tiny problem of how will we enter Elysium to begin with. But that's in a few days I suppose. And we can't stay here."

Jack: "In spite of your condescending tone, you're correct, Kyle. We do steal it."

Nadia. "I can likely disable the tracker. We'll need to leave tonight whenever the commotion starts again. They won't be examining departing vehicles as much then."

Georg: "You're all just going along with this aren't you? Fucking unbelievable!"

Jack: "What are you bitching about Brother? Grow up. If you have a better plan, say it. That goes for all of you, in fact. Any takers?"

No one spoke. With this silence, a smug grin began spreading on Jack's face. Kyle quickly reached up with his hand and

wiped it off before Georg saw it. No point in a fist fight.

"Right," Kyle said. "If we're going to do this, we had best move along and start supply gathering. There must be shops around here which sell that shit. We make lists of what each person buys, and we reconvene at the apartments in six hours."

Everyone opened their rucksacks, pulled out their glass pads, and hashed out their shopping lists. Kyle set off towards a shop he had seen which was selling hunting gear. This was a worthwhile endeavor, it turned out. Apparently, no one was buying gear, so the proprietor practically gave away the wares Kyle wanted, which were mostly high calorie non-perishable food items, as well as a few hunting rifles and hunting knives, for the inevitable hunts for food the group would have to engage in.

Kyle wound up going to several shops, gathering whatever supplies his card would allow. It seemed that allowances for survival necessities were quite high, even as allowances for decent food were so low. The duality of Mars.

After his shopping, Kyle eventually returned to his apartment, finding that Jack also had, and not long behind him, Georg and then Nadia. They took stock of the supplies they'd bought. They had enough. They weren't going to be comfortable, but they'd be alive.

After taking stock, the group decided to case a vehicle. One of the desert cars which seemed common in this colony was parked across the street from their apartment block. The group used the zoom function on their glass pads to examine the vehicle from the vantage point of one of the apartments. They staked out every inch of it, determining its security features and

how to steal it. Jack assured them that the commotion would begin at night, so they decided to wait. This was how Mars worked at this time, in this region. Nighttime combat was the norm, and the colonial residents would shelter in place. If they got their timing right, Kyle and his companions would be undisturbed in their theft.

The hours after this rather dragged, from Kyle's perspective. He fiddled with the television in his apartment for a while, and finding nothing that interested him, began fiddling with weapons. Among the supplies he'd gathered were a few small tools, which, he discovered, allowed him to make small weapons modifications. His first order of business was switching his own pistol to from semi-automatic to full auto. He had a feeling he'd need it. He further adjusted a few things on the hunting weapons he had bought, and it was during this process that, at last, the commotion began.

The process of the commotion was a near replica of the previous night. First were the initial sounds of shelling. Second were the sirens, at which point, the city lights very rapidly began going out. People were shutting themselves in their homes. Kyle hurriedly packed. One of the team members had bought extra rucksacks.

When Kyle had packed his supplies, he sent out a single word telepathic message to all of the team.

"Now!"

A few moments later, Kyle, Jack, Georg, and Nadia had exited their apartments, and were filing towards the desert car. In front of the driver's door was a panel containing a number pad.

Carefully, yet very quickly, Nadia removed this panel, using a small drill, and began carefully, meticulously, one by one, cutting wires. She had finished in no more than eight minutes, by Kyle's estimation.

"Try the doors now," Nadia said tersely.

Everyone tried the doors, and found them unlocked. They all piled into the desert car, with Jack in the driver's seat, as he knew the way. With his pocket knife, he hotwired the car. It turned out to be no different than a Terran car in that respect.

"How did you know how to do all that?" Georg asked, addressing Nadia.

"I'm not just a pretty face," Nadia said, not answering his question at all.

They waited in the started car, instinctively measuring their timing. hey waited until soldiers had just marched down Bismarck Straße, and then Kyle gave the order of "Now!" once again, and they started driving.

They trailed the soldiers not so closely that they'd be spotted, but not so far that they'd have the gate closed on them. They reached the south gate and found it simply stood open, and a soldier next to it simply waved them through. They wanted people out fighting more than they cared about a vehicle possibly being stolen. Once through, Kyle and his companions were once again on their own, in the Martian wilderness.

Upon exiting, the group saw that the soldiers they'd followed were lining up and loading onto shuttles, which stood about a hundred yards to the south of the gate. Apparently they were to

be air dropped, even though the fighting was close enough to be seen.

"We should go around that," Georg said.

"No shit," Jack said, turning the car to the left. Thankfully, none of the soldiers lined up tried to stop them from driving away, and to the east they drove.

Even in the night, Olympus Mons was visible, rising from the surface of Mars like a phoenix. As they drove in its direction, the sights and sounds of the skirmish began to fade. Neu Berlin began to disappear from the horizon and from the minds of Kyle and his companions. They had a new set of worries now.

The group drove for several hours, and slowly but surely, the terrain became less and less even. The altitude began to rise as well, as they grew closer to Olympus Mons. Eventually, as the terrain began to transform into low-lying plateaus, Jack at last pulled to the side, between two massive rocks, hidden from sight. Here, the party opened a packet of dehydrated meat. They ate it dry, deciding not to waste precious water. Since Kyle had no need of food, he chose to not eat for the entire trip. At last, they all rested, stretching out as much as they could in the desert car. They all slept rather soundly, except Kyle, who chose to keep watch.

At first, Kyle was uneasy. He found himself looking out of the windows nervously. However, he eventually started to relax. Outside of either any settlement or any battlefield, they were well and truly in no man's land. Eventually, Kyle began staring at the incredible sky, and yearned to walk in the night air. However, according to the thermometer which was set up in

between the driver and passenger seats, the temperature outside the car was negative 35 degrees Fahrenheit, (negative 37 degrees Celsius) and Kyle dared not open the car even for an instant. Soon enough, he too fell asleep.

It felt like mere moments later that the sun began to stream into the desert car. Slowly and reluctantly, the inhabitants awoke. The temperature had become bearable almost instantly with the rising of the sun, so they all stepped around the rocks their car was parked between and relieved themselves, the party set out again for Elysium.

As always when on Mars, Kyle was taken in by the scenery. Mars, even in these unpleasant times, was breathtaking. The red and tan rock formations, which were rising into increasingly higher plateaus in the direction the crew was driving in, cast the most magnificent shadows, which seemed to morph into nearly all the colors of the rainbow. Here and there on the ground, the snow had melted and formed little lakes, around which tiny wildflowers were sprouting.

This beauty was not untarnished, however. In several places, the ground was pockmarked with explosion craters. A number of times, the group passed what had obviously once been adobe villages, which had been bombed and then abandoned at some point in recent years, casting a sobering image.

The first full day and night on the road passed without incident. Kyle and the others managed to largely avoid bickering, instead absorbing themselves in the scenery. While some ships flew overhead on occasion, mostly German and ET in origin, they failed to see a single sentient creature on the surface on

their first day and two nights, though as ever on Mars, small creatures, especially reptiles, were abundant.

On the second morning, Jack announced that they needed to hunt for their breakfast. They were running low on packaged goods, and so he and Kyle set out for the plateaus, with Georg and Nadia watching the vehicle. By this point, they had gone east along almost the entirety of the southern side of Olympus Mons, before making a sharp turn south, to avoid the stretch between Olympus Mons and Tharsis Montes, which was off-limits, according to Jack.

Kyle and Jack walked into the plateaus with their hunting rifles drawn. Not long into their hunting trip, they came across several of the beaver-like creatures which are common on Mars. Kyle felt some guilt upon shooting them, but the others needed food. As they were turning back towards the car, that they ran into momentary trouble.

The plateaus were marked by many small caves and alcoves. While Kyle and Jack perhaps should have made the attempt, they could not have checked all of them. As they were walking back to the car, several inhabitants of these caves emerged-massive spiders, black and thick shelled, and anywhere from 3 to 15 feet (1 to 3 meters) in width.

The creatures began to advance on Kyle and Jack. Kyle raised his gun. In a panic, Jack shoved it down.

“No! Slowly lay down the animals we killed. Sling your gun over your back. And they’ll let us go.”

And no doubt to both of their surprise, it worked, and the spiders merely watched as the two men hurried back to the car,

empty handed.

“We should have checked,” Jack said once they were driving away. “This isn’t our planet. Those animals aren’t our food. At least not when there’s all those spiders around. We’ll hunt somewhere flatter.”

A couple of hours later, after much complaint from both Nadia and Georg, they reached an area away from any plateaus and were able to hunt from there. They’d brought with them a flint stick, and in this region of Mars, tumbleweeds were common. A fire was lit, the creatures were cooked, and the group continued onward, gliding over the desert, with Jack always driving. He was the only one who seemed to truly know where they were going.

The rest of the second day and night passed normally, as did the third. As they neared the Martian equator, the geography began to shift. Small bodies of water became less frequent, and the topography became less stark. Fewer mountains and plateaus, and more sand dunes and craters. They also passed some very interesting structures, namely massive stone domes rising from the desert. These domes, according to Jack, were alien bases, both ancient and modern. These, they avoided altogether. There would be no benefit to having a violent run-in with aliens, as they had no chance of survival.

On the fourth day, which according to Jack, would be the final of the journey, the group ran into trouble once again. They had awoken and were cooking a quick breakfast, parked among several sand dunes and craters. The sand in this area was darker and heavier, close to the bright orange that’s commonly associ-

ated with Mars. Small black balls of iron were also peppering the ground, each about the size of a blueberry. Kyle did not know it at the time, but these are caused by the frequent and violent lightning storms which are common in the more equatorial regions of Mars, which cause the iron rich soil in the region to occasionally separate, thereby forming the little iron balls.

As Kyle and the others were minding their own business, preparing breakfast, emptying their bladders, etcetera, they heard the whir of motors from an indeterminate direction. Everyone immediately regrouped around the car, in formation but with their weapons put away. They didn't wish to force a conflict, unless necessary.

Within seconds, the vehicles they had heard emerged from the ground around them. These vehicles came out high on the monstrous sand dunes. They looked like mammoth tubular tanks, on one end of which was an enormous drill, obviously for tunnel boring. Legs were projecting from the bottoms of the tanks, which were rotating treads, the same as those on combat tanks. These tunnel boring vehicles were obviously ancient. The sides had visibly been patched over many times. The tanks themselves were about 150 feet long each, and there must have been five of them.

Doors on the sides of the machines opened, and out came large parties of people. These were all human, or at least human shaped. They stood at about Kyle's height, if not even taller. They all wore a hodgepodge of spacesuits, with enormous black helmets like those seen in early deep-sea diving. The

parties of people unloading from the tanks were on dirt bikes, and slung across their backs were huge rifles.

Jack: “Oh fuck.”

Nadia: “Are those-“

Jack: “Marauders! Everyone, car;

NOW!”

Everyone sprang towards the car, with Kyle moving towards it backwards, withdrawing his Luger-looking pistol and firing. One advantage of his design was that he was equipped with perfect aim, even on fast moving targets. He took down a dozen “marauders” with one plasma shell to the head each in the possibly three seconds before he’d reached the desert car and slammed his door shut. Jack had already started the car, and they began rocketing off into the dunes. From the moment the tunnel boring machines emerged to the moment the group started driving again, no more than several seconds elapsed.

Of course, the Marauders, as Jack had called them, weren’t giving up. At least 50 of them on their dirt bikes came chasing after the desert car, in and out of the dunes, firing their large black rifles. Jack hit a button on the console in between the front seats, and a sun roof slid open. Kyle didn’t need to be told what to do, and nor it seemed did Nadia. Both stood, drawing their pistols and beginning to fire at their pursuers.

“I’ve got 28 shots! You should have all 40! Try not to waste!” Kyle shouted as he began taking aim and mowing down Marauders.

“No shit!” Nadia replied.

Kyle and Nadia proceeded to gun down Marauders, with Jack

skillfully weaving through the dunes at incredible speed. The Marauders seemed to never stop coming. It seemed as though when one went down, another took its place.

"I'm out!" Kyle shouted just a few minutes later.

"Here!" Georg's voice from below. Kyle looked down, and Georg was handing him one of the hunting rifles. Kyle took it and resumed sniping.

"Fuck! I'm hit! My shoulder!" Nadia screamed a few seconds later.

"Switch places!" Georg shouted, and Nadia got down into the cab while Georg stood, joining Kyle.

As high octane as the chase was, it lasted very little time. The Marauders were obviously very skilled, however they could not compete with enhanced soldiers designed to be perfect shots. A number of Marauders were also killed, or at least taken from the equation, by their own miscalculations. Jack swerved so skillfully and tightly that a number of Marauders crashed violently into the sand dunes. Others attempted to jump on top of the desert car from atop the dunes, but miscalculated and came to an abrupt, crunchy death on the hard sands over 100 feet below them.

Eventually, the dunes very suddenly ended. The Marauders, whichever ones remained alive, did not follow the car out of the dunes. Kyle and Georg stood looking out of the roof for a few minutes, until they heard Jack's voice.

"Air's pretty thin in here. Get back in so I can seal up," he said. And so Kyle and Georg did, and Jack resealed the sun roof.

Kyle turned his attention to Nadia, in the backseat. On the

floor lay the bullet and a pair of tweezers, likely from the first aid kit which sat open on her lap. In her hand was a pocket-knife, the blade of which glowed orange, likely from the lighter which also sat on Nadia's lap. The bullet wound was on her left side, right at the spot where the arm meets the shoulder. Nadia must also be enhanced, given that the bullet, which was of a large hunting caliber, was quite deformed, in spite of only having penetrated a small distance into Nadia's unarmored shoulder. Nevertheless, a potentially alarming amount of blood was flowing from the wound.

"Are you alright?" Kyle asked, feeling stupid even as he said it.

"Yes," Nadia said, apparently not noticing the irony in the question, likely a bit delirious from the pain.

"I'm just trying to work up the courage to cauterize this wound," Nadia added, gesturing vaguely to it with the glowing blade.

Kyle had an idea.

"Oh no. There's no need of that. Here, hand me the knife so I can cool it," Kyle said.

Nadia handed him the knife, and leaned back, visibly awash with relief. After a few seconds, Kyle leaned into the back seat and with a deft thrust, cauterized Nadia's wound with the glowing blade.

Nadia's resulting scream temporarily deafened all the car's inhabitants, and the string of profanity that followed would have made a sailor turn beet red.

"What the fuck was that for?" Nadia demanded, upon recov-

ering her senses.

"I thought I heard that it hurts less when you're not expecting it," Kyle said, trying and failing to hold back his laughter.

"Well, what horseshit. And laugh while you can, because whenever I'm not in pain anymore, I'm going to butcher you like a pig," Nadia said.

"Now now, children, calm down," Jack said, in between snorts of laughter. "They'll let us into Elysium more readily if one of us has urgent medical needs."

"What the fuck were those back there, anyway?" Georg said.

"Marauders," Jack said simply.

"I thought they were an urban myth," Nadia said.

"Either of you care to explain?" Kyle said in annoyance.

"Quite," Jack said. "In the 1840s, some Prussian archaeologists found a stargate in Egypt. They had no guidance, and no clue what they were doing, but as people will, they powered on and went through the gate and found themselves here, on Mars. The natives were helpful at first, and were glad to allocate a few places to live. These Prussians, in possibly the first attempt at bioforming a population, abducted a few thousand people from around Europe and began blindly transfusing them with alien blood. Sheer fuckin' madness. This altered these people's genomes of course, and they all went insane. They got turned loose, and the Mars colonization project was essentially abandoned for the time being. The Marauders are the descendants of those mutants. They ride around in the tunnel boring machines that were supposed to be used to colonize."

"I never heard about them in my previous trips," Kyle said.

“Nor did I,” Georg added.

“Ah,” Jack said, “That’s because both of you are on Mars in the 1980s. The last Marauder is killed on June 1st, 1971.”

“Can’t come soon enough,” Nadia spat.

“Speaking of things that can’t come soon enough, when do we reach Elysium?” Kyle asked.

“About five hours,” Jack said. “And you’ll see why when we get there, but if we don’t state our true intentions at the gate, they’ll know we’re lying. The security there is lie proof. We’ll have to state the truth and hope for the best.”

“Will you ever run out of things to tell us about this place that you could have told us earlier?” Georg said.

The final five hours passed uneventfully, if very slowly. They were moving further south, and into a seemingly lifeless part of Mars which was covered with craters and jagged, low-lying mountains. They began to know of their proximity to Elysium when they started seeing an increased number of ships, and finally, for the first time since leaving Neu Berlin, they saw ground based cars. These were also desert cars, designed on the same principles as their own. However, the ones they passed were sleek and black, and had obviously been designed with aesthetic appeal in mind, as opposed to the pure utility of the desert car that the crew was driving.

Not very long after they began seeing the vehicles, they at long last pulled up on Elysium,. They wound through a number of mountains, before reaching a large, flat area. It had likely at one time been the bed of an ocean, Kyle guessed. It was surrounded on all sides by mountains. Around the expansive

ocean bed were perhaps a dozen massive glass domes, each one at least fifteen square miles in size. The group of domes was arranged in a rough half circle. At the center was an enormous rectangular landing pad for small ships, and parking area for ground vehicles, which were surrounded by a massive fence, approximately 150 feet tall. Jack set the car towards this area. They had reached Elysium.

"Remember; only ever display your real intentions, at least at first," Jack said.

The desert car pulled up to one gate of the parking and landing area. Security personnel in sand colored environmental suits stood near the gate, and the minute the desert car pulled up, the guards surrounded it, rifles in hand. One of them, clearly female and carrying a glass pad, approached the driver's door, and knocked. Jack calmly swung it open.

"State your business." the female security officer said.

"We're here to see Salvador Coronado about a possible business venture. We are armed. In the back passenger seat, there's a woman with a gunshot wound to the left shoulder. My companion in the front seat here is a synthetic," Jack said.

As he was speaking, the security officer was holding up her glass pad, roughly in line with Jack's face. Kyle could see that the screen was scanning in some way.

"He checks out," the security officer shouted to the guards surrounding the desert car. "Unload the injured one. Take her in. The rest come in traditionally."

Kyle felt a slight surge of triumph. They'd made it in, though for how long would remain to be seen. From seemingly

nowhere, a stretcher was produced, and Nadia was wheeled away. The men were waved out of the car and through the gate to the landing pad, their desert car left behind. Just beyond the gate, they were patted down, their guns taken, and at last they were loaded onto a tram which had been stationed near the gate. This tram hovered, and had no driver. It simply set off towards one of the domes once its passengers boarded.

"Are we safe now?" Georg asked.

"Not yet," Jack said, "and prepare for a long walk."

A short while later, the tram reached the dome. The men alighted and moved towards a door which had opened on the side of the dome.

"Hide nothing mentally," Jack said, and entered the door. With trepidation and determination, Kyle followed.

Inside the dome, Kyle stepped onto a narrow cobblestone pathway, in the sand. The path shot straight ahead for what must be over a mile. At the end of it was another door, to another dome set inside the one that the men had just entered. Kyle heard a faint buzz and looked up- high above them, near the top of the outer dome, were perhaps half a dozen drones. They were large and black, with what looked like Gatling Guns on the bottom, trained on the visitors.

Kyle at last understood the security system. These drones were continuously scanning the visitors' intentions and thoughts, ensuring nothing untoward was occurring. The wall was so long that if anyone had nefarious plans, they would inevitably think of them, even if only for a fraction of a second, and they then would be eliminated via the Gatling Guns. Kyle

stepped forward and walked. He controlled his thoughts very well. He tried not to think at all about the intent of the visit, instead focusing his mind on more leisurely things. The intent of the visit inevitably did come up a few times. When they did, Kyle let them come and flow through his mind openly. He reached the end of the path peacefully, Jack following not far behind, and a few minutes later, Georg also reached the end. The door opened into a large white waiting room. The door shut decisively behind them, and they were alone in the waiting room.

“Now we wait. Hope we’ll be seen, and have our belongings returned to us,” Jack said. And so they did.

They waited for what seemed an eternity, and indeed must have been approaching three hours. At last, a door opened at the end of the room opposite the one that the men had entered from. A young brunette woman in business attire of the era stood in the doorway. In her hands she held the glass pads of Kyle, Jack, and Georg. She entered the room, and after the usual sort of greetings, in broken German with an Argentine accent, handed out the glass pads.

“Please come with me, gentlemen. Señor Coronado will see you,” she said, turning to the door.

“And our friend?” Georg asked.

“She’s convalescing, Sir. She didn’t qualify for regeneration,” the woman replied.

Kyle and the others followed. They found themselves just inside the second glass dome, and discovered that they were on the rim of a crater. The crater began its slant downwards about

100 yards from the inner side of the second dome. A few small buildings stood around on the rim, however everything important seemed to be in the crater.

Down within the crater was a decently sized town, of German architecture, though a majority of the surface area was taken up by large mansions with sprawling gardens. There were also massive multi-leveled greenhouses, and near the center, what appeared to be a small commercial district, with shops and restaurants. Kyle supposed that this must be the prototypical colony design for the ones that he and Georg had visited when they were eliminating the Roundtree bloodline.

The Argentine woman led the three men a short distance around the rim of the crater, to a large, cylindrical elevator that descended downwards into Mars. The Argentine secretary pressed a code into the number pad which stood next to the door of the elevator, which then slid open, and so Kyle and the others boarded behind the secretary. The depth of the crater was perhaps 1/4 mile, and the elevator descended to slightly beneath that, emerging at a place well and truly underground.

They found themselves in a very beautiful subway station. The walls were adorned with mural scenes of medieval Europe, and the floors were of glistening white marble. From the ceiling hung a large multicolored crystal chandelier. The small portion of the station that Kyle and the others exited into was separated from the majority of the station by a glass wall. The Argentine secretary explained that this was for military and business visitors, who were apparently not supposed to interact with colonists.

The train arrived very soon after the visitors. The train was a low-lying maglev affair, silver and very sleek. The back-most car stopped just in front of Kyle, his companions, and the secretary. This car was not open to the others. Segregation of visitors and military from colonists was tight, it seemed. Kyle and the others boarded, and passed through quite a number of stations across two of the different domes. At a station in the third dome, they at last alighted. They found themselves in another very ornate subway station, this one decorated in a Moorish style.

After deboarding from the train, the Argentine secretary led the men to yet another elevator. This one reemerged above ground, however it opened at street level, on the floor of the crater that this township had been built into. Unlike the Germanic township they had entered through, this town had a decidedly Iberian aesthetic. It was also smaller than the German town, standing at perhaps 10 square miles in size, to the German's 15.

Coronado's secretary guided Kyle, Jack, and Georg a short distance of perhaps two blocks to what was apparently the Coronado family mansion. This turned out to be more modest than anyone was likely expecting, though by most standards it was still quite palatial. The house was, like most around it, three-stories in height, in the Moorish style of architecture, and surrounded a courtyard. The facade of the house was rather shamed by that which stood in front of it, namely a truly monstrous wisteria tree, which covered nearly all of the front lawn, turning it purple with its fallen petals.

At the base of the wisteria tree was a young girl, perhaps 12 years of age, with thick strawberry blonde hair. Kyle offered her a warm smile and a wave. The girl accepted at first, and stood to approach the party which was headed for the front door of the house, then seemed to somehow catch herself, and sat back on the little stone bench, returning to the large, leather-bound book she had been reading.

Kyle and the others reached the door, which was large and wooden, and the secretary opened it. Everyone entered. On the inside, the house proved to be about what Kyle had expected-large, and with an open floor plan and Moorish decor befitting its exterior. The entryway, as seemed standard in these kinds of houses, was black and white checkered marble. Salvador Coronado stood in the center. He in fact looked a few years older than he would 30 years later. Age regression at its finest.

Kyle decided to "cut to the chase." Glass pad in hand, he strode decisively up to Salvador, and spoke. He did not offer a handshake. However, he did speak Spanish, in an Argentine accent.

"Good afternoon, Señor Coronado. I'm Kyle Dellschau. My friends and I represent a future business partner of yours." Short, to the point. Kyle had finally had enough of wasting time.

"Good afternoon to you too, Herr Dellschau. From which time period are all of you arriving?" Salvador said, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"30 years," Jack said, stepping forward with his hand extended. "Our benefactor is that enigmatic figure known as Emmermann. I'm sure you've heard of him. I'm Jack Flynn. This

is Georg Nimmer. And you've already met Kyle here."

With this last line, Jack turned to glance at Kyle, shooting him a rather infuriated look. He clearly didn't like Kyle's strategy of getting straight to business.

"30 years? Well, I say that's enough time for tea!" Salvador exclaimed, and then, turning to the secretary, said, "Carmen. Please arrange that. The good stuff, from Sri Lanka."

"Sí, Señor Coronado," Carmen said, and sprinted off into the house. Salvador led Kyle and the others into the courtyard, to a low lying wooden tea table underneath two crossed palm trees.

For a while, they all simply chatted. About Martian weather, about the problem of the Marauders, about what was the future for Salvador, about Salvador's daughter, Estefania, whom they had spotted beneath the wisteria. Eventually, the tea arrived, and soon after, the conversation turned towards business.

At some point on the trip, Kyle had closely examined his glass pad, and found a way of calling Emmermann directly. He'd decided he was going to do this now. Why go through the trouble of trying to convince Salvador of something, when he could present the evidence outright?

Emmermann answered the call on his glass pad almost instantly, a slight, knowing grin on his face. Kyle explained the situation, and Emmermann agreed to speak to Salvador, and over camera, show evidence of himself being in Salvador's future.

As Kyle was handing over the glass pad, he got a telepathic message. From Emmermann, from across time and space.

"Well done. You passed the test."

Kyle sat bewildered. Not at Emmermann's psionic prowess, that didn't surprise him. But which "test" had he referred to? Surviving Mars? But then he got it- fiddling with the glass pad and finding the obscure method of calling Emmermann directly and expediting the process had been the test. He had wanted Kyle and the others to, as it is commonly put in this era, "work smarter, not harder."

Salvador disappeared from the courtyard, leaving Kyle, Georg, and Jack alone. After his footsteps had vanished, Georg turned sharply to Kyle.

Georg: "Kyle. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Kyle: "Why should there be anything wrong with me?"

Jack: "You really don't know what you're doing, do you? Kyle, you don't just make a business proposal to these types without warning. Especially not Salvador Fucking Coronado. You're lucky we got him on a good day. If not, he'd have killed us."

Kyle: "I suppose I didn't realize these types are so fond of beating around the bush. I'll bear it in mind next time."

Georg: "Yes. You will. And you'll consider yourself lucky that there will even be a goddamn next time! And there still might not be, Kyle. What if he doesn't like what The Old Man says, hmm? We'll be fucking machine gunned, that's what!"

Kyle: "You sound as if we wouldn't even try to escape."

Jack: "Don't be stupid. Of course we'd try. But you've seen the security here. We would not succeed. And we'd never see Nadia again. Let this be a lesson, Kyle. Don't do stupid shit. Now all we can do is wait."

And so they did wait. Kyle was not entirely unprepared; he'd

clocked all the entrances and exits and hiding places, as well as everything that could be used as a weapon. He'd been doing this from the moment they arrived at the colony. But then, he realized, so must Georg and Jack have been. It was what they had all been taught and conditioned to do at all times. And so they simply bid their time, and drank most of the pot of tea. After drinking all this tea, Jack promptly stood and began emptying his bladder into a nearby plant.

"I do have toilets, Señor Flynn," Salvador's voice said.

The others looked up in shock and horror. Salvador had come out of nowhere. However Salvador had a jovial tone. Kyle guessed that he found Jack's action not so much offensive as quaint. Salvador was obviously not used to the blunt, no nonsense actions of military personnel, and found them amusing and backwards.

Recovering his surprise, Jack sheepishly returned to the tea table, where Salvador had already reseated himself. The new situation was explained. Emmerman, in his charismatic way, had convinced Salvador of his veracity, and of the veracity of these perfect strangers he had essentially dropped on Salvador's doorstep. He was now loaning out their services, as proof of concept.

The services they were to provide, it turned out, were military in nature, and fairly simple. Salvador and the rest of the colonists were seeking more safety. This meant underground cities. Fully underground, not simply within craters, as Elysium's townships were. On paper, this was fairly simple. Mars is riddled all throughout with massive volcanic tubes,

which are nearly all dried up and safe, as Mars has had almost no tectonic activity in many millennia. In practice, of course, the plans of the colonists were more complicated. The first difficulty being that these tubes were, at the time, essentially uncharted. While ground-penetrating radar did exist, it was still very much in its infancy as a study.

The second, much greater difficulty was that these tubes and caves were inhabited, heavily, by life forms hostile to the colonists. These life forms were primarily made up of sentient dinosaur reptilians, which resemble an upright, featherless Deinonychus, standing at about 10 feet tall (many whistleblowers refer to these as "raptors.") While Kyle and his colleagues, with their enhancements, could indeed fight these creatures, even one-on-one, the unfamiliarity with the territory was a severe detriment.

The other major inhabitants of the tubes were Martian insectoids. While many in the modern era refer to these as "Mantids," it is not an accurate term. These insectoids, more than anything, resemble golden brown ants, stand at about eight feet tall, and walk on only their back-most legs. At the time, they were a far larger threat than the dinosauroids. While they are physically weaker, they have far greater numbers, and of much greater technological development. The real threat, however, is the Martian insectoids' use of the infamous monstrous spiders as attack dogs.

Naturally, it was this latter group that Kyle and his companions were being sent to take on. Salvador Coronado had put in an order that Nadia would be regenerated and returned to the

group, who were also being moved.

Apparently, among the domes that made up Elysium, was one that served as what Salvador called a “military annex.” Kyle and the others were to be housed here while they carried out their operation. They were to clear out a certain cave system on their own. They would be issued their gear once in the annex, and would receive an exact location.

By the time Kyle, Jack, and Georg left, it was evening, and the sun had begun to sink low, creating Mars’s signature lavender evening sky. They boarded the segregated car on the maglev, knowing better than to break rules, even though they likely could have gotten away with it.

The men had been told how many stops to travel before they reach the annex. The station they deboarded at was decorated in a decidedly Norse aesthetic, with wooden rafters and murals of the Norse gods. This station did not have a glassed off area, so the men used the only staircase up to street level.

Far from the pleasant, even glamorous surroundings present in the other domes that Kyle had been in, the military annex looked about as one would expect- plain and sterile, with temporary metal buildings, and in some cases even tents, all of which were painted in desert camo. One unique feature, at least different from the two townships Kyle had seen, was that this one had also built into the walls of the crater, as evidenced by the many windows visible.

Another difference was that this crater buzzed with life and activity. All up and down the unpaved streets, soldiers in desert camo were marching. On the left breast of every uniform was a

patch which bore a picture of Mars being clutched in the claws of the Reichsadler. A few SS officer types were also seen striding about, although they seemed to be outnumbered by about 25 to one. Even more outnumbered were women, of whom there were very few seen here. The stock was nearly entirely Germanic, with the occasional East Asian or Arabic archetype.

On the streets were also large, armored desert trucks. These broke from the norm in having wheels, rather than hovering. One unique vehicle type was seen parked on the rim of the crater- enormous, human shaped mechs, at least 20 feet tall, once again painted in desert camo.

As usual in spaces like this, simply standing around looking lost and out of uniform was enough to get attention within a couple of minutes. In fact, one of the SS men noticed the group and gave them check-in instructions, as well as a direction to head in, with the assurance that flagging down a truck was quite acceptable, if they should find one heading in the correct direction. So off they went into the base, eventually flagging down a truck, as instructed, since they were hopelessly lost. The truck delivered them at the desired location, which was one of the office areas built into the walls of the crater.

They entered the office through a set of glass double doors, placed into what was obviously a much older doorway. Kyle and the others found themselves in a cavernous, rock carved room. A modern desk had been set up in the center, and an SS woman sat behind it. The men approached, and the woman gave them directions to the person they needed to see; Major Braun.

They set out, advancing into the rocky underground. They

discovered that there was a bewildering network of hallways set into the rock, coming off the side of the crater, that the Germans were using as the main entrance. While modern desks, computers, and such had been brought in, this was clearly an ancient construction, not of solar human origin. This place had clearly been built for a much taller species. The walls were also decorated, with detailed carved reliefs of many species engaged in daily living. Hunting, fishing, farming, getting married, having sex, raising children, and so on. Kyle's inner archaeologist yearned to come out and study every inch, but he stifled it. They had business to do.

They reached the Major's office. This was about ten stories up in the hive-like network of halls in the rock. The Major's office was in one of the rooms that faced the crater- a large window had been installed looking out over the crater and the base within. A sizable desk, oak rather than the metal from the other offices. Major Braun sat behind it. He was a massive Alpine German man, tall and with thick, dark brown hair and a heavy, stately beard. He stood in his chair when Kyle, Jack, and Georg entered.

"New recruits?" Major Braun said.

"Not precisely," Jack said, stepping forward and extending his hand.

And so the men explained their situation to Major Braun. He was a bit incredulous. Future generation fighters, of designs that did not yet exist for him, was hard to fathom. As they were explaining, Nadia eventually joined. Finally, Major Braun came to a decision; they were to be taken to a doctor, and then after-

ward have their military prowess tested so as to confirm their veracity, and he would be putting in a call to Salvador Coronado. He used the telephone on his desk to call "Hauptmann Jaëger" (whomever he might be) requesting reinforcements to escort Kyle and the others to the doctor.

Kyle found that he rather admired Major Braun. He was one of very few people Kyle had seen who didn't turn to jelly at Emmermann's name, and who wanted real, physical proof. But he also wasn't prejudiced. He remained respectful throughout the interaction.

Soon enough, a group of soldiers arrived at Major Braun's office to escort the new arrivals. They led them to a crude cage elevator in the halls, clearly added into the hive recently, as everything here seemed to be. Kyle, Jack, and Georg looked at each other sheepishly for having not been able to find the elevator, and Nadia gave them a smug grin when she saw this. She had easily found it on her way to the Major's office.

The elevator went down to below the street level of the crater, and opened onto more of the hive. This fully subterranean level was composed of larger rooms than the ones off the side of the crater, and had no decorations on the walls. The site had been repurposed by the Germans for medical uses, at least the rooms that the crew could immediately see. One room had several regeneration tanks, another had many hospital beds, and yet another had been repurposed into a laboratory of some kind. Out of this last room came a doctor- fairly short, blonde, and Germanic, looking about 18, though the way he carried himself betrayed that he was much older, but had been

age regressed. Embroidered in light blue on his white coat was the name “Nadler.” Dr. Nadler stepped forward, and spoke to the soldiers escorting Kyle and the others.

“New recruits?” Dr. Nadler asked.

“It seems so,” one of the escorting soldiers said, and no one objected. No need to complicate things even further.

“Splendid!” Dr. Nadler said. Then, turning to Kyle and company; “Let’s get on with examining all of you.”

By this point, it was nighttime. The examination process wound up taking all night. It started with being placed naked, two at a time, into a glass tube, which proved to be a sonic disinfection chamber. Kyle had to get into it next to Georg, which was awkward. However, it felt nice to be clean after four days on the road.

After disinfection, they were subjected to a bevy of tests. I’ve already described such tests before in this book, so I’ll spare the reader the redundancy. One notable thing were blood tests being issued, and in this context, Kyle consented. The nurse operating the blood testing machine all but fainted when the composition of Kyle’s blood appeared, and she realized that Kyle was a synthetic. Up until that point, she had been flirting with Kyle. After this, she could barely contain her disgust as she led Kyle around to the different testing areas. One other noteworthy thing, which Kyle would learn later, was that the other men were required to give sperm samples. Kyle was exempt from this, and was mercifully spared even being asked, which he would have found humiliating, as he simply did not produce sperm, a fact he was very sensitive about.

When the tests at last concluded, Kyle, Georg, Jack, and Nadia regrouped, and were escorted above ground again. By now, the sun was rising again, turning the sky a deep tangerine color. They were met by Major Braun, who explained that he had been watching the results of their tests in real time from his desk. He said that while they medically checked out, and the results of their gene sequencing seemed to corroborate their stories, the testing was far from over, and they were not being given any rest.

As soon as Major Braun left, the group was escorted to elsewhere in the crater, now for military tests. They went first to a shooting gallery, in one of the rooms set into the side of the crater. They were tested on their marksmanship, using the same kind of guns that the guards in Neu Berlin used, as well as some massive rail guns. Once they'd passed the tests on stationery targets, they were taken to another area, and had virtual reality helmets put on them, in which their prowess on moving targets was tried.

After a short break for a vile replicator lunch, they were taken to a large tent containing a huge makeshift gymnasium. Within it, the group was tested on martial arts skills by going up against a robot, and also made to lift and throw massive weights, up to 5,000 pounds, (2,200 kilograms). Finally, they were taken to a large freshwater swimming pool, carved from the rock ground, and made to swim laps. Surprisingly, they weren't tested on underwater combat. At the end, which was mid afternoon, they were allowed into a sonic shower module, like the one in Neu Berlin, and were given uniforms.

These uniforms looked the same as those worn by the many soldiers around the base. Desert camo fatigues, with a patch on the left breast reading “Marsianer Heimschild,” in gray gothic letters, beneath an image of Mars, which was clutched by a Nazi eagle. They were also issued with tall socks and green lace-up combat boots. After dressing, the group was walked back to Major Braun’s office.

It was here that, at last, they learned their fate. They were being given military contracts. For one Martian year, they would work for Marsianer Heimschild, (the main German militia protecting Martian colonies) in exchange for the weapons necessary to do favors for Salvador Coronado. They’d be living in the military annex of Elysium. While they’d be allowed to mingle with other soldiers in the evenings, their housing was to be separated. As future generation soldiers, they were considered too dangerous to mix with except in small amounts. And so, they would be kept in apartments segregated from the other soldiers. Their glass pads, and all other gear, would be returned only when they left Mars.

At no point were Kyle and his comrades asked for their consent. This was all arranged by Coronado, and likely Emmermann, as Major Braun stated that he had made contact with the latter, though whether he had made contact with the Emmermann on Valhalla in the 1980s, or the 1955 version, we will likely never know. Nonetheless, Kyle and company had been bought and sold, having had no choice in what they were doing.

Major Braun had been decent enough to afford the new arrivals the rest of the day, plus all night, to familiarize them-

selves with the base and get some rest. He also issued them with large, cardboard maps, which folded to fit in their pockets. He'd marked their housing, and given them keys to the two apartments they would be sharing.

Once again, Kyle and the others were on their own. They set out, following the maps to their new homes. Their apartments were also in the sides of the crater, however, on the other side from the Major's office, and a good deal higher up. Kyle and company eventually managed to flag down a truck, who took them in. The driver of the truck said they were lucky- their apartments were directly above the base's brothel.

He was correct. Indeed, the part of the base they wound up in seemed very much a kind of red light district. In this section of the crater, the rooms in the first four levels had red, rather than clear, windows. A number of prostitutes stood on the street. Most of them were women, however there were a surprising number of male prostitutes. Across from the brothel, in the crater, were a number of tents, open to the road, no doubt serving up foul alcoholic drinks from rigged replicators.

Before unloading from the truck, the driver gave them one last tip; these bars were not the real watering hole of choice. That was a place on the surface, half a kilometer east of the dome which covered the military annex of Elysium. A place known as The Glass Hub. This is a place for the reader to remember.

Eventually, after much searching, the group managed to find an entrance to the side of the crater which wasn't an entrance to the brothel. Within, they found another cage elevator, and

cautiously took it up to the 15th level. The elevator didn't seem terribly stable, but they had no choice. As it turned out, that elevator never did break down during their year on Mars, being more stable than it looked.

They entered into another hallway, with more reliefs on the walls. There were apartments here, with number plaques by the doors, and curtains over the doors. Kyle and friends found their apartments, numbers 1502 and 1504, across the hall from each other. Kyle was holding the key to apartment 1504, and pulled the curtain aside. His heart sank at what he saw.

"Home sweet fuckin' home," Kyle spat out.

It turned out that the curtains didn't cover the door; the curtain was the door. Inside was a single large stone room. While a few hospital screens had been set up here and there, to give "privacy," this was clearly a rather pitiful attempt. In one corner was a toilet, with a large pipe connecting it to the replicator which stood at the opposite end of the room. The replicator was built into a white, wooden countertop, which formed a sort of kitchenette. At the center of the countertop was a sink with no faucet. Another sonic device. At the end of the countertop was an electric stove with two burners.

At the far end, with their heads toward the window, were two mattresses. These were quite large and tall, however they simply sat on the floor, with no bed frames. Mounted on the left wall was a flatscreen television, and a few feet from it, a hideous green loveseat. Along the right wall were some wooden cabinets, as well as a large gun cabinet of black metal. Ruefully, Kyle realized that this gun cabinet was what the key was

intended for.

Everyone also noticed that there were no actual lightbulbs. There was some kind of photonic manipulation technology in place, Kyle guessed, then wondered how he'd known such a thing.

Laid out on each bed was a smartsuit. Pale orange, and full body, along with instructions on its use. Apparently, the suit was bioreactive, and required full skin contact. This meant that the wearers were required to meticulously shave off any and all bodily hair, using the electric shavers found in the cabinets. The hairs they shaved off, they were instructed, were to be used to stock their replicators.

"So. I not only have to eat my own shit, I now have to eat the hair off my balls?" Georg said in disgust.

Alongside each suit on the bed was a card. A small card with a magnetic strip, this one served much the same purpose as the ones they'd been issued in Neu Berlin. These had, on one side, an image of an aerial shot of Elysium.

The apartments were all single room. While they did have individual toilets, (albeit with no privacy whatsoever) the showers were communal, sonic showers, at the end of the hall, also built into pre-existing rooms like the apartments.

At last, everyone opened their large gun cabinets. Inside, they found the guns they'd practiced with. Large rail guns, smaller plasma rifles modeled off a Sturmgewehr, as well as pistols. These pistols were different from the ones they had traveled with, looking more like a 1911, though they were still plasma guns, and the caliber was quite large.

Eventually, after much discussion, it was decided that Kyle and Jack would share apartment 1504, while Georg and Nadia would share 1502. Whenever someone got exceedingly tired of their roommate, they would move. At first, there was discussion of the men all sharing one apartment and leaving Nadia alone, however Nadia refused to hear of something so sexist as basic chivalry.

Resignedly, they all settled in. As first order of business, they searched the cabinets along the wall to the right of the entryway. They didn't find much; the promised electric shavers, a few changes of sheets, some pieces of dinnerware, and a few manuals for the electronics around the apartment. Kyle found it most interesting that they'd had the time to install built-in televisions, but hadn't been bothered enough to install a simple door.

Kyle and Jack decided that they may as well put on their suits, which were apparently designed to be worn at all times except in the shower or while copulating. Jack already had some experience with these suits. To start, they laid out a sheet on the floor, and shaved off all their body hair while standing on the sheet. They then shook this hair into the replicator stock. This was done by opening a portion of the countertop, as if opening a trash can.

With this through, they turned their attentions to the smart-suits. To Kyle's surprise, they had no buttons or zippers, being enterable only through the neck hole. As it turned out, they were a massive nightmare to put on. They barely stretched, meaning that one had to contort one's body in all sorts of ways

in order to fit in. But eventually, they managed.

The suits were lined with rather an odd material. It felt slightly gelatinous, and very smooth, and for the first few seconds of the suit being on, it was cool, and quite painful, like tiny needles pricking every inch of the body. Within about five seconds, however, the bioreactive element kicked in, and the suits suddenly felt warm, and easy to move in. In fact, the suits felt easier to move in even than moving naked.

At last, with their suits now equipped, Kyle and Jack put their fatigues back on over their suits and fell into the couch. They turned on their television, and found that the only thing broadcasting was propaganda. But as there was not much else to amuse themselves with, and they didn't feel like venturing out, not even to the brothel, they watched the propaganda for several hours until lights out arrived. Or at least for their apartments. This base never truly slept. All through the night, the same sounds heard in the day continued- vehicles, shouts, commerce, weapons firing off, and so on.

After the sun went down, it became obvious why there were so many apartments available here. At this high level, near the surface, whatever system was in place to warm the floor of the crater and the lower levels did not reach. Had Kyle and company not been wearing these smartsuits, which kept the body's temperature stable in even the most extreme conditions, they would have likely perished from hypothermia overnight.

Morning came, and Kyle and the others awoke. They regrouped in the hall, and with no further instruction having been given to them, they decided to take their cards and leave.

They saw not one person in this part of the base. They were the only parties occupying these apartments.

At the bottom of the elevator, the crew was greeted by a young SS woman. At this hour, a number of buses drove around the base, picking up soldiers to deliver to their various jobs. Kyle and crew boarded one of these, and the SS woman gave the driver instructions to take Kyle, Jack, Georg, and Nadia to the "loading out point," as she called it.

The "loading out point" turned out to be one of the massive tents around the crater. Inside were several long, plastic tables, issuing this and that. Weapons, vehicle keys, air tanks, and so on. At the far end was always one person with a scanner gun scanning cards, and past them, more people issuing whatever the specialty of the table was. At the opening of the tent was another card scanner, who would direct everyone to the tables they needed. Kyle's party, as they were already armed, were to receive two things.

The first was large, white, rectangular air tanks, with small vents on the sides. Kyle himself was to receive no air tank. They had hoses coming off the back, which connected to glass helmets. These helmets had an adjustable collar of some sort, though they were still rather loose fitting. In addition to these, Kyle and crew were issued with vehicle keys, and directions to the vehicle bay.

The military annex of Elysium, much like the other townships, had two domes covering it. A portion of the mile-long stretch in between domes served as the vehicle bay, which was set up in segments by vehicle type. A man scanning cards stood

at the doorway into the inter-dome area, directing everyone to the vehicles of use. Kyle and the others were directed to the area for small unit vehicles.

To reach the area, they must have walked nearly two miles around the dome. Plenty of room had been allocated for each vehicle type, of which there were many. There were a number of fighter planes, which were painted in red, white, and black, several sizes of tanks, a few saucer-shaped spacecraft which looked to hold half a dozen people apiece, and more mechs like those glanced from the floor of the crater. Up close, one could see that the mechs were Arasaka products, as the Arasaka name was prominently displayed on the back. It was a bit surreal for Kyle to see these somewhat primitive products from Arasaka Robotics's infancy, 30 years before they could create something so advanced as himself.

The last section of vehicles was the one Kyle and crew were seeking. These had large, black, all terrain armored vehicles, shaped much like the desert car they'd arrived in, only these were much larger, and with a machine gun mounted on the roof. They also drove on large, all-terrain tires, rather than hovered. On the hull of each one, just below the windshield, was a prominent swastika of Martian orange. In the sides were numbers. Kyle held key 18, so they approached vehicle 18 and entered it, Kyle driving. A large door to the outside of the dome simply stood open. There must have been more security in place, but it wasn't visible at the moment.

The vehicle interior was quite high tech, and had also been build for comfort, with bucket seats of faux leather. The back

area was large enough to step into, and had a stretcher as well as a gun rack. From the ceiling descended a periscope viewer, on the shaft of which were several buttons for operating the machine gun. In between the two front seats was a large touch-screen interface, which had a blue screensaver.

“Welcome aboard. Will the driver please scan their card?” A feminine voice from the touchscreen said.

Kyle held his card up to the screen, which beeped, then the image suddenly changed to a map, one to the group’s objective, which Salvador must have uploaded. It was only then that the group realized that they had not been given any instruction as to the location of their mission. As usual, the people doing the work were the last to know.

The map showed two waypoints; one was the location of the vehicle, which they would later learn was called a “sand chariot,” and the other was the location of the cave they sought. A line appeared on the screen, denoting a route. Kyle began driving, allowing Nadia to narrate, as she was the one who had entered the front seat alongside him.

Just a few minutes into the drive, which was mostly eastward, they passed by a building which Jack said was The Glass Hub. This proved to be a fitting name for it- it was large, round, two-story tall and made of glass, or at least some translucent material, save for its white metal roof. A terrace surrounded it. While it was modular, Jack explained that its current location was placed above several caves, which served as an extension of the club, as well as a brothel that Jack said was doubtless better than the one on base, not only in service

quality, but in security and in the treatment of its ladies of the night.

After passing the club, Kyle decided to ask something which had been bothering him for some time.

Kyle: “Who are these Coronado fuckers anyway?”

Jack: “It’s a long story. Essentially, by mid to late ‘42, the Axis knew they were losing the war, and had to shift focus to off-world, including Mars, which they’d abandoned for so long. So they started sending over families, mostly from the Americas whom they recruited. The Coronado family was one of them. That girl you saw, Estefania? She was the first person from the Americas to be born here. Colonial royalty.”

Soon enough, the group reached their waypoint. They were placed in between two mountains, and on the ground was a large hole, descending into the ground at an angle, with ridges on the side which indicated that it had been bored artificially, rather than naturally formed. It went at a sharp angle, so that one couldn’t see very far into it.

Georg: “Right. Nadia, Jack, you’re coming in with me. Kyle, you’re standing guard right here until we call you in.”

Kyle: “Under no fucking circumstance can I allow that!”

Jack: “Kyle, be reasonable. The three of us have experience in Martian combat. You don’t. And someone must watch the vehicle. It will be stolen or stripped for parts if no one is here.”

Nadia: “How about, instead of anyone barging in blind, we actually see what’s down there?”

And without waiting for an answer, Nadia leaned against the side of the sand chariot and began to, everyone assumed,

remote view into the space they were trying to enter. The men stood, looking sheepish, for several minutes, before Nadia reopened her eyes and addressed the group.

“Looks like a farming community. Not a city. They’re definitely not expecting company. The three of us should be fine, initially.” Nadia said. And apparently, that was that, as Georg, Nadia, and Jack went into the opening, leaving Kyle behind.

And so Kyle waited, standing near the sand chariot, walking laps around it and observing for any would-be interlopers. None came. Kyle saw only the usual lizards and small birds. From below, he received no telepathic message to join, and resisted his temptation to do so, in spite of the sounds of combat which echoed onto the surface.

Soon enough, however, he got a telepathic transmission.

“Man down. Help now. Watch steep entry.” Jack’s telepathic signature, or “voice,” unmistakably.

Kyle didn’t need to be told twice. He sprang into the sand chariot, started it, and drove right into the hole. The angle at first was slight, but suddenly became very steep, and then dropped off entirely into a cavern, with the opening some 30 feet off the ground. In the cavern below, the action was happening. Two spiders were on the wall of the shaft. Kyle used his telekinesis to aim and fire the sand chariot’s roof mounted machine gun, shredding the two spiders.

The opening led into a huge cavern of the same reddish rock seen on the surface. Within the cavern was the farming community that Nadia had spoken of. On the floor of the cavern were a number of large beds growing corn, or something like it,

raised up several feet from the ground. Lights floated above them, in lantern type devices. Kyle realized that these bugs weren't so primitive. They had electric or battery lighting and antigravity. To the right side were a number of stepped terraces, growing the same crop. All the other walls of the cavern had windows on them, indicating that the farming community lived in a hive, like the military annex of Elysium.

Down within the cavern, the sights and sounds of battle were obvious. Many corpses lay on the floor, both of the ant-like insectoids and spiders. Nadia was in close combat with three insectoids. Jack and Georg were nowhere to be seen. With a shrug, Kyle leapt to the floor of the cavern. The lighter gravity cushioned the fall, and besides, his carbon alloy bones were designed to survive far worse. He barely felt the landing, rolled to a standing position, and aimed his rail gun precisely, taking out the three ant people Nadia was fighting.

Nadia looked back at him gratefully, and sent him another telepathic message.

"Thanks. Now I need to go reload. You need to go help Georg and Jack. Head into the hive." And with that, she projected a map into Kyle's head, of the portions of the hive they had seen.

Kyle gave a quick nod, then turned and sprinted into the hive, following Nadia's map. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Nadia free climbing up the wall to the opening of the cavern where the sand chariot was parked. Kyle entered the hive, rail gun raised.

This hive looked much like the one in which the military annex of Elysium was placed, only visibly much smaller. The

wall art was also rather different. This hive portrayed more farm scenes on its walls, along with more intimate family scenes. Kyle felt pangs of guilt, both from his inner father for destroying what was no doubt a future for many of the ant people in this colony, and from his inner archaeologist for the destruction of these historical sites and those who held the memory of them. But it was an order, and Kyle was literally incapable of disobeying it.

Kyle made it a good distance into the hive unmolested. There were only corpses and empty rooms for the first stretch. He then had the sudden realization that he didn't know where he was going, so he telepathically pinged Jack.

Kyle: "Where the fuck are you?"

Far be it for Kyle to beat about the bush.

Jack: "Let me look through your eyes. I'll direct you. Georg is hurt bad. I need that telekinesis of yours to finish here first though."

Without even fully understanding how he did it, Kyle opened his mind, feeling Jack enter, and look through his eyes. Jack then guided him along, telling him which stairs to take and where to turn, here and there around the hive.

Jack exited Kyle's mind when Kyle reached the objective. This turned out to be a huge room at the bottom of the hive. The room's ceiling must have been 40 feet off the ground, and was filled all over with large clay cylinders, rising from the floor. Only a few bodies were scattered around, more ant people who were taller and bulkier than the others, as well as one truly massive spider, at least 30 feet wide. A number of the clay cylin-

ders had broken open, and covered the floor with a thick, translucent fluid. Near the far end of the room, Kyle saw Georg and Jack seated on the ground. He rushed over to them.

Georg was leaning against a crouching Jack, a massive vertical gash on his stomach. However, he was still breathing and alert, and jokingly saluted Kyle as he approached.

“One of those drone assholes got a good lick in on me,” Georg said, gesturing at one of the larger ant people.

“Right. What’s going on? Looks as though we’ve cleared the hive. Why are we not loading out?” Kyle asked.

Jack gestured at the wall closest to them, which, on closer examination, was not a wall. It was two massive stone doors, which Kyle approached, seeing that there was an odd, orange, foul-smelling gelatinous substance leaking out.

“Royal jelly,” Jack explained. “This room was the hatchery. That room beyond is the nest itself. Now, I don’t know what’s in there. There’s a psionic shield that I can’t see through.”

“Alright. But what might be in there?” Kyle said.

“That’s precisely the question. There’ll definitely be many eggs, and drones to tend the eggs. You’ve seen what the drones can do,” Jack said, gesturing at Georg’s wound.

“And you need me to open up that door with telekinesis.” Kyle said.

“Precisely. And one other thing; there will be a queen. Likely attached to an ovipositor. These queens are not like the rest of the hive. They’re 20 feet tall. Take her out first. If she gets close enough, she will fuck you up. Now, let’s wait for Nadia,” Jack concluded.

Nadia indeed showed up not long after, rail gun reloaded. She was brought up to speed in the same way as Kyle, and at last the group moved as far back from the door as they could without becoming pinned in by the clay tubes, one of which Georg was leaned up against.

“I can’t walk, but I can still shoot,” Georg said resolutely.

Kyle focused his mind fully, and opened the massive doors, which slid into the walls in the side of the hatchery. To his surprise, he met almost no resistance. Beyond the doors was a large room. This one was mostly spherical, save for the one flat wall which the door was on. Unlike the rest of the hive, this room was unlit, except for the massive eggs which glowed orange, lining most of the room, and held in place by the royal jelly Kyle had seen earlier. The queen was not visible.

Within seconds, drones began pouring out, making horrifying shrieking noises. Unlike the smaller ant people, these drones could fly, which they did out of the cave. Most were gunned down before reaching the soldiers, however, one managed to land beside Kyle. The bug stood on its back two legs, and raised one front one for a swipe. Kyle reached up and managed to stop it. Nadia, who stood near him, jumped to his assistance, and they managed to take down the monstrous ant being hand to hand, as the quarters were too close to use their rail guns.

There were perhaps a dozen drones, and no more spiders showed up. It seemed that this hive didn’t feel the need for large numbers of spiders. For a moment, everything was peaceful, until the queen made her appearance.

The queen had remained hidden until then by very strategically positioning herself above the door to the nursery. Now, with the most terrible high pitched roar, she dropped. She stood on her two back legs, drawn up to her full height. As Jack had predicted, she must have been 20 feet tall. Her coloring was also unlike the others. She was white, with a black band on her underbelly, and her abdomen segment had red stripes wrapping around it. She was beautiful and regal, even as a bug, and it pained Kyle greatly to raise his rifle and down the queen with a shot to her massive head.

The crew's final act was to clear the nest. The rail guns made short work of this, as they could take out huge clusters of eggs with each shot. And with this done, they left. They alternated turns in halfway carrying Georg, who refused to be fully carried. When they reached the exit, Jack and Nadia free climbed up to the sand chariot, after which Kyle used his telekinesis to lift Georg up to them, before at last free climbing up himself.

They reached the base again in good time, finding that now, there was a man at the gate with a glass pad. He quickly scanned all cards and waved them through, and just a few minutes later, stretchers arrived. While Georg was in the worst shape by far, none were totally without a scratch. As a result, they all got a dip in the regeneration tanks, which were in the medical zone described earlier. Their smartsuits remained on, however they had to take off their fatigues, and when they emerged from the tanks, they had been replaced with new, clean fatigues.

Georg was the last to exit his tank, having needed the most

repair. Kyle, Jack, and Nadia crowded around him as the hydraulic arm lowered him.

“How are you feeling now?” Nadia asked as Georg stepped from the human-shaped metal frame, a technician handing him his change of fatigues.

“Like I need a goddamn drink!” Georg exclaimed good-naturedly. “Let’s go to this bar I hear so much about.”

And so they went back to the vehicle bay, where they learned they essentially had unlimited use of their sand chariot, so long as they stayed within bounds. The Glass Hub was, it turned out, and so the group jetted off to it.

When one drew close to it, The Glass Hub turned out to be much larger than it had looked from a distance. There wasn’t much activity at this hour. Parked outside were only a few vehicles, mostly private rather than military. Kyle and the others deboarded and approached the front and only door, which was of glass, like the rest of the building. The “house rules” were posted on a white cardboard sign next to the door.

All sexual services performed on the premises- no exceptions.

No means no.

No weapons. All weapons must be deposited at the door- no exceptions.

No factional warfare- leave politics at the door.

Prices of drinks and services are always non-negotiable- no exceptions.

Enjoy yourself!

There was a short airlock beside the door in which a young woman stood, checking coats, patting down and taking weapons, and asking a few basic questions. Did they have memberships, were they interested in any "services," and did they plan to cause any trouble. The girl also scanned their cards, and it turned out they'd already been paid for their job.

The inside of The Glass Hub was even more impressive than the outside. A single large, circular bar stood at the center of the room. It seemingly stocked with every alcoholic drink imaginable. The music being played had a very sensual, blues-like sensation. The first and second floor both had a number of cubicles- a peek inside of which revealed they had cots. These were for "services." If one preferred more privacy, one could pay extra for access to one of the basement private rooms. However, even the privacy of the cubicles was not necessary. If the girl (or man) one chose agreed to it, one was allowed to have sex right at the bar or on one of the tables. Indeed, the group saw Salvador Coronado seated at one of the tables, casually chatting with one of his young adult sons, (whose name they'd later learn was Vincenté) while the son was being "serviced" right there in the open. A glimpse at the truly casual nature of sexuality off-planet.

Salvador gave Kyle and company a wave, which they reciprocated, and then quickly moved away. This was their evening, not their boss'. So they rounded the bar, ordering their drinks from one of the bartenders, a bearded and tattooed Nordic giant named Gunter. And for the first time since arriving on Mars, they relaxed. They had their drinks, and before long, Kyle,

Georg, and Jack went into cubicles with their chosen girls, and to their surprise, Nadia went with one of the male prostitutes. Not too much later, the place began to be crowded with soldiers, who were seemingly far more welcomed than colonials. The girls certainly greeted them more jovially.

Eventually, after sunset, Kyle and his companions made their way back to their desert chariot, and from there, back to their apartments. They'd had a truly good time, for the first time since their arrival on Mars. They'd spent most of their pay, but it wasn't as if they had anything else to spend it on.

To describe in detail the remainder of the year spent in Marsianer Heimschild would be largely redundant. Kyle and crew were kept separated from the remainder of the military annex of Elysium. They'd be sent out to clear hives on their own, as they had the first day. They'd also be occasionally called over to the Coronado mansion, and Salvador would connect them to Emmermann via glass pad. Estefania and Kyle also met during these visits, and she became his only true friend outside of the group. She took to loaning him books to read, mostly Nancy Drew, which Kyle read to humor her.

In time, Kyle took to another project; historical preservation. He felt great guilt at the destruction of the ant people's culture that he was being forced to partake in. As a result, he used some of his payment (which was per job, rather than per hour) in order to buy several large sketchbooks, as well as high quality colored pencils. He'd spend a good deal of his spare time in the apartment corridors making detailed sketches of all the wall art. He also sketched in the apartments themselves. This was

doable, as himself and the crew were the only occupants of this part of the base, and none of the apartments had doors. He became particularly taken with one relief in the apartment he and Jack shared, of a lion with a serpentine dragon coiled around its abdomen. This relief was partially hidden until he moved the shelves in the apartment in order to fully take it in. Should the thousands of sketches he made ever be recovered, they would be invaluable historical relics.

Eventually, the climate on base for Kyle and crew shifted from ignorance and distancing to outright hostility. It was somehow leaked, likely by one of the regeneration tank technicians, that Kyle was a synthetic and that Jack was American. Therefore Nadia became canonically their whore, and Georg became filthy simply by association.

Many times, the crew would return from an op to find that their apartments had been trashed. Twice, Kyle and Jack found their apartment defaced with spray paint. Once directed at Jack, with the words "Yankee go home" surrounded by a border of swastikas. This was painted over the beloved lion and dragon relief. The second was defacement on the window, where someone had spray painted the words "fuck off, toaster, directed at Kyle. Both defacements were in English, which was an added insult. The group also had rocks and food thrown at them, and of course general insults. At one point, Kyle decided to approach one of the prostitutes who operated out of the base's brothel, and she immediately pulled a switchblade and threatened to claim he was attempting to rape her.

The Glass Hub became the crew's "safe zone." The staff loved

Kyle and his friends, as they ordered expensive drinks, tipped generously, and stayed well behaved. The rules against hostility kept the other soldiers in line too, so that there was essentially no harassment on the premises.

There was one significant thing which Kyle accomplished on this trip. It happened towards the end of their stint, and was the only time during it in which they saw the Martian dinosauroids. This was a massive mission. Their unit, along with many others, were sent to a large crater to clear it out. The desert chariots, many of which also hauled tanks, were being driven, when they saw that they had perhaps been anticipated. One of the dinosauroids was standing on the rim of the crater. Kyle had an inspiration. He turned to Nadia, who was driving. They were still over a mile out from the crater.

"Nadia. Full speed ahead. I want to get there before these other fucks. Call it a hunch," Kyle said.

Nadia didn't need to be told this twice. She stepped on the accelerator, and pulled up to about 50 yards, directly in front of the dinosauroid. Kyle alighted from the desert chariot and advanced. The dinosaur being wore green robes and had an elaborate plant-based headdress. Kyle didn't understand the dinosauroid culture at this time. However, he'd later learn that this garb denoted the dinosaur being as a tribal chief, so "Chief" is what I will refer to him as. The following exchange is a rough translation of an entirely telepathic conversation.

Chief: "What is your business here, Paleing?"

("Paleing" was, at the time, the dinosauroids' main term for the German and American invaders.)

Kyle: “Sir. I don’t know. They don’t tell me anything. I’m not a willing participant.”

Chief: “Then why do you approach me?”

Kyle: “You have clearly anticipated our arrival. I wish to tell you something; if you fight us, you will lose. If you value the lives of your men, your women, and your children, you will leave immediately. You will not resist. And then, you may possibly be allowed to live.”

Chief made direct eye contact. He saw Kyle meant it. However, he didn’t respond before turning and simply striding back into the crater. Not 10 minutes later, the tanks and sand chariots began arriving. After the usual epithets hurled at Kyle and crew, the march into the crater, and the valuable areas underneath it, began. They found the underground area emptied. The dinosauroids had vanished into the uncharted depths of the Martian lava tubes, where none dared follow. Kyle’s attempt at diplomacy had been a success.

About halfway into the crew’s stint, someone donated a piano and microphone to The Glass Hub. Kyle and Jack wrote a song, though Jack did most of the work. This song was about the passage of time and the fractal nature of life as a time traveler. Jack played and sang it on the crew’s final night of their stint.

I’m 15, for a moment
Caught in between, 10 and 20
And I’m just dreamin’
Counting the ways to where you are

I'm 22 for a moment
And she feels better than ever, and we're on fire
Making our way back from Mars

15, there's still time for you
Time to buy and time to lose
15
There's never a wish better than this
When you've only got 100 years to live

I'm 33 for a moment
I'm still "the man," but you see I'm a "they"
A kid on the way, Babe
A family on my mind

I'm 45 for a moment
The sea is high, and I'm heading into a crisis
Chasing the years of my life

15, there's still time for you
Time to buy and time to lose yourself within a morning star
15
There's never a wish better than this
When you've only got 100 years to live

Half time goes by, suddenly you're wise
Another blink of an eye, 67 is gone

The sun is gettin' high
We're moving on

I'm 99 for a moment
I'm dying for just another moment, and I'm just dreamin'
Counting the ways to where you are

15, there's still time for you
22, I feel her too
Every day's a new day

15, there's still time for you
Time to buy and time to choose
Hey, 15
There's never a wish better than this
When you've only got 100 years to live

There was not a single dry eye in all of The Glass Hub. Kyle and his companions chose to leave then, on a good note, and retired to their apartments. Kyle packed his sketchbooks, and the others packed their few meager possessions. To their surprise, no one arrived to escort them off base. Rather, a portal opened in one of the apartments, and they all stepped through, grateful to see the end of their stint in Marsianer Heimschild.

The crew found themselves back in the portal room in Emmermann's basement. Emmermann himself stood waiting, alongside Salvador Coronado, still looking about 30 years old.

Emmermann and Coronado congratulated the crew, and

then explained a few things. First was that Marsianer Heimschild was not planning on letting Kyle and crew leave, nor would they have ever had their belongings returned. This was why Emmermann had portaled them out of their apartments directly. He also explained that Kyle would be returning to Camp Hero with the boys alone. Jack was being sent to deep space, as were the others. They had all arrived before lunch, so there was time to find the boys.

The boys were found on a green bit of lawn, outside the castle, playing kickball with two footmen. Kyle quickly ran over and pulled Max into his arms. This stretch of separation had felt so very long. They all went inside, back to their rooms, and cleaned up for a quick lunch before heading to the landing pad, their glass pads returned. Two ships waited for them. One bound for Camp Hero, the other bound for deep space. As they were all saying their goodbyes, Jack made one plea towards Kyle.

"Keep my boy alive for me."

Kyle nodded. He planned to do just that.

Kyle and the boys deboarded at Camp Hero not 10 minutes later, as usual. They went straight into Jimmy's office. By Kyle's calculation, 10 Camp Hero days had likely passed, which meant he'd missed Sondra's dead drop photos twice, and he trusted Jimmy to have picked them up in his stead.

Jimmy issues Kyle with three envelopes. Two were marked with Kyle's name in black ink, as usual, and the third one in red ink, not as usual. Kyle opened the more normal ones first, and found the usual contents; photos from missions Sondra had

been on. In the third one, he found something awful.

Inside this third envelope was a note, along with a small collection of pictures.

“Kyle-

My husband found the camera. This is the price I paid for not giving it up and not telling him where it was from.

-Sondra”

Kyle looked at the photos. Sondra had taken many pictures, all over her body. She was covered in severe bruises and scratches all over, indicating she’d been in a severe fight. She’d also included many photos of the Roth household, which had been made a shambles.

The final picture was of Ivan Roth, splayed out on the floor and covered with stab wounds. Sondra had given it right back and more. Fighting back tears, Kyle shoved the photos back in the envelope.

“Welcome home, Kyle.” Jimmy said.

Author’s note. I hardly know how to conclude such a long piece of writing. I will say that I chose to be so self indulgent only for personal peace. These are largely old memories, which I’ve never been able to tell in full before now.

Chapter 15

I would like to next draw the reader's attention to a mission which occurred during the infamous Orion Wars. This war was, essentially, a convergence of two galactic empires, those of Draco and Lyra. Approximately 50,000 years ago, the empires of Draco and Lyra were marching across the stars. The war began when these two empires reached a highly desired location; The Gate of Orion. This is a planet-sized stargate located within Orion's Belt, nearest to the star we call Mintaka. The borders of Lyra and Draco converged at this gate, putting a grinding halt to the marches of these empires, and triggering an unimaginably destructive war which lasted for approximately 30,000 years, ending in a decisive and brutal Draco victory not only over the Gate of Orion, but also nearly all territory which had been in the Lyran Empire, and also the thousands of worlds accessible via the Gate.

Kyle was being sent to the star we call Bellatrix, to protect a young girl named Karaa who was to become an anti-Draco resistance leader, about 35,000 years ago. This was all Kyle was told. It was a 3-man mission, consisting of Kyle, Jack, and Max. Max was now routinely being sent on missions. This operation was initiated in late 1985 or early 1986.

After the briefing, Kyle returned to his desk, as they were not to leave until the next day. Just a few days prior to this, Isabel

Muehlbauer, whom Kyle had guarded several times and who had saved his life in the Syndicate base in the Philippines, had moved into the desk next to his, now age advanced to an adult woman, and delighted about her new assignment, as it meant being housed in a proper barracks and having access to the security division canteen.

It was just a few days later that it happened. Kyle and Isabel were at their desks, chatting about this and that, when a man in a Navy uniform walked up to Isabel's desk, with a clipboard.

"I'm looking for Janie?" the Navy man said.

"Janie transferred. I'm her replacement," Isabel said cordially.

"Well shit," the Navy man said, looking at his clipboard. "She's on my list for this op. I still gotta fill my quota. What's your name, new girl?"

"Isabel Muehlbauer."

"Right. Isabel Muehlbauer. Well, Isabel Muehlbauer, can you speak Russian?"

"Yes."

"Alright. And you know your way around an AK-47?"

"Yes. I did go through basic training, Mr.- What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. And you'll do. Come with me, please."

In spite of the Navy man's cordial "please," it was not a request in any way. With a shrug, Isabel stood and followed him. Kyle would have said something as she left, had he known that this was the last time that he or anyone else at Camp Hero would see her again.

Kyle had also learned that for this mission, Max would need to be age advanced to adulthood. That evening, on his bunk, he had a talk with Max about all the new needs he would have once he was in an adult man's body, and a few ways in which he might take care of them. This was a very personal conversation between father and son, which I will leave to the reader's imagination. I've mentioned it at all only at Max's behest.

In order for the age advancement to take place, Max had to go to that most dreaded of locations: the medical annex- Dr. Simmons's zone. Kyle steadfastly refused to allow Max to go to this part of Camp Hero alone, and so Max came and gathered Kyle, and they marched to it. The march was long, however Kyle had recently learned of a shortcut which was entirely underground.

This shortcut is worth mentioning, as it took one through a number of corporate offices, which Kyle had been unaware existed, due to the extreme compartmentalization of Project Phoenix. The corporations present included the following:

AT&T Inc.

Capitol Records.

International Business Machines Corporation.

Warner Music Group.

Eastman Kodak Company.

While Kyle guessed that the Kodak offices were likely where Sondra had her films developed, he had, at the time, little to no notion of what these corporations actually did. He could tell that they were well funded. Their offices were sleek, white, and chrome, or at least the hallways outside them were. Kyle did

not, at the time, enter the actual offices. He didn't have access.

Kyle and Max reached the medical annex well ahead of schedule. By this point, Max had his own glass pad, with his own orders included on it, among which, the order for his age advancement. This was one mission where the orders were of unknown origin, as was the origin of the mission itself. Kyle, Jack, and Max had simply received the directives and some basic information on their devices, and were following them- at the time, a normal feature of Project Phoenix.

Upon reaching the medical annex, Max pulled up the orders for age advancement, and handed them over to Corinne, Dr. Simmons's assistant. He eyed the robotized Draco guard who stood at the door to the regeneration tank room, who ultimately did not let Kyle pass when Dr. Simmons called Max into the room. However, the door to the tank room did have a window, and Kyle stood as close to the window as possible and looked in, though he could not see as far as the tank which Dr. Simmons took Max to. He did catch a glimpse of Max bolting by the door as an adult, however, too quick for him to pick out much.

It wasn't until about 10 minutes later, when Max emerged from what Kyle guessed was the toilet, that he got to see his boy as an adult. Max came out from the tank room, and Kyle went to embrace him, overwhelmed with fatherly pride. Max was now a very handsome, dark haired, muscular man, clad in a black smart suit. He looked like all that Kyle could have hoped for. Not that he'd have cared either way. However he did think, with pride, that his son would have to shoo women away with a stick.

“Christ, Dad. You’re squeezing me like I actually did grow up 15 years. Fuck.” Max said at Kyle’s embrace.

Kyle smiled and released Max, then happened to see that Max was wearing no shoes.

“Why’s he not been issued shoes?” Kyle demanded.

“We did not know his ultimate size,” Corinne explained.

“I see. Well, we must be at the outfitters anyway. Goodbye,” Kyle said, taking Max’s arm and leaving the medical annex. He had no intention of spending any more time in that place.

They reached the costumery, and were met by both Jack and, as usual, Angelique. Jack had already dressed in a black smart-suit. These particular smartsuits, it should be noted, were smaller than the usual, stopping above the forearm and calf, and also having a zipper along the back, making them easier to get in and out of than those they had worn on Mars. The presence of a fly hole indicated that these suits were designed more as a form of concealed armor, and possibly basic life support and temperature regulation, than as all-round suits which one could live in and off of exclusively.

Once Kyle, Jack, and Max were all in their suits, Angelique dressed them further, in the outfits they were to be wearing to blend in. These turned out to be white, puffy, long sleeved toga-like garments, with leather sandals which tied halfway up the calf.

“We look like fucking idiots,” Jack said in between guffaws of laughter, and the others agreed.

For this mission, they were issued with no weapons, aside from some small knives concealed under their robes, and no

glass pads. They were on their own, on-site acquisition being the name of the game here. Once again; they were being abandoned, to learn their way around the situation into which they were being thrust. And thrust into it they did, heading straight to the portal room and through the portal which was opening for them as they arrived.

They found themselves in a place which was well and truly alien. They were in what seemed to be some kind of market square in a bustling city. The architecture was of low lying buildings of an adobe like material, however the roofs were made of multicolored glass, and were arranged in remarkable geometric patterns. This place truly couldn't been created with a human mind in control.

At least a dozen species of aliens walked about and did their commerce. Squirrel people, several varieties of lizard people, a few Naga, (humanoid torso and arms, the rest of the body like a snake) as well as a number of species who looked largely like humans, save for having skin colors unlike those of any human on Earth. There were also a few humans of a Terran archetype strolling about, but not many. No one so much as looked up at the sight of Kyle, Jack, and Max portaling into the middle of their marketplace. Such a thing seemed an utterly normal occurrence in this environment.

"Right, now where the fuck are we?" Kyle said. In his Nazi way, he was very unsettled by this display of multiculturalism.

"Judging by the architecture, and what I know of the girl's history? I'd say we're in the Saiph system." Jack said. "God. She used to be so… alive. You should see her now. Our now."

“Right. Now how do we find the girl?” Max said.

“We just ask. That’s this society,” Jack explained. “They’ll use telepathy to see through your ruse. So we have to just be honest.”

“Lots of… individuals here. Where do we start?” Max asked.

Jack shrugged. “Let’s start with the vendors. They’re who’ll know the most. If they don’t know anything, we’ll move to another district. And hope this is even the correct city. Or planet.”

And the three set out separately, each taking a third of the market. Kyle headed south. He learned that while many people who were shopping were speaking verbally, the vendors spoke only telepathically. Kyle learned this quickly, after the vendors acted rather offended when he attempted to speak to them, in several of the various Orionite tongues which were present in his database.

In general, there was an air of unease within the city. At first, it was unclear why. However, eventually, the clouds which filled the sky cleared, and the reason became obvious. Hovering in the sky, the size of a moon, was a black pyramid. A Draco military ship. The planet had already fallen under occupation. This would make the process of leaving with Karaa more difficult, should it prove to be necessary.

The marketplace was truly fascinating, selling seemingly every ware which might be of use to an Orionite. A number of these were surprisingly similar to those found on Earth. Screws, for instance, were essentially identical. Many of the vendors also had computers which looked much like those on Earth in

the 1980s, and in fact these were what most of the vendors used for their transactions. Kyle also saw several fish vendors, and the fish on offer looked essentially identical to those on Earth, save for being somewhat larger, likely due to lighter gravity.

Most interesting were the three currencies present. The most common one consisted of coins. All these coins had obviously, at one time, been various kinds of shells, however they'd been carved into rounds. Kyle noted five kinds, of differing sizes. The second currency was crystal thumb-drives, which would be plugged into the vendor's computers for a few seconds, then handed back to the user, like a credit card. The final piece of currency was the most surprising, and was always handed over very discreetly, as though trading illicit goods. This final currency consisted of genetic material, either in handing over a few hairs, a few scales, or a few blood vials. Whenever these were handed over, the result was always a paper-wrapped box from beneath the vendor's table.

Kyle had been searching and asking fruitlessly for about an hour when he and Jack received a telepathic message from Max; "Found her."

In his time with Max, Kyle had been training him in more advanced telepathy, such as being able to indicate a direction, as he now did. This was Max's secret talent, which he had managed to hide even from his testers at Camp Hero, having the instinct that it would be used to change his position. Kyle, Jack, and possibly Andrew were the only ones he had shown it to up to this point. And so, with his instruction, Kyle and Jack set in the direction of Max's "voice."

They found Max at a vendor, who was an iguana woman of at least eight feet in height. She wore a brown hooded robe, and was looking around nervously. Kyle and Jack approached, and Max turned back to the Iguanoid vendor. The following telepathic exchange occurred.

Max: “Tell these two gents what you just told me.”

Iguanoid vendor: “I know little. I merely know a little about the girl from Bellatrix whom you call Karaa. I won’t speak further without information.”

Jack: “And what information do you want, good lady?”

Iguanoid vendor: “Who and what are you gentlemen? You look and dress like Cassiopeians. But you’re clearly not. Your eyes aren’t the correct shade of blue, except for the dark blonde gentleman’s. Where are you from? And are you with The Horde?”

Kyle: “The Horde?”

Jack: “That was the term here at the time for the Draco.”

Jack turned back to the Iguanoid woman.

Jack: “No ma’am. We are not with The Horde. And nor is the girl we seek. In fact, we’re here because of them. Which brings us to your first request. Technically, we don’t exist yet. To you.”

Iguanoid vendor: “Are you trying to tell me that you’re from the future?”

Kyle: “To you, it seems that way, yes.”

Iguanoid vendor: “I don’t know what you men are. But you’re clearly not from around here, and you’re clearly not one of the Horde. I suppose it’d be to my interest if I told you where to go. On the condition that you forget I ever existed.”

The men, with a shrug, agreed. It wasn't as if they needed her further. Had the circumstances been different, they likely would have killed her. However, as it was such a public place, with no discreet weapons, and it was unlikely that she would make any record, they left her alive. And so the Iguanoid vendor gave them directions to the Bellatrixese district of the city. They didn't ever learn the name of the city, it should be noted, so we will simply call it "Saiph City."

"Right," Kyle said as they walked from the Iguanoid woman's stall. "I'm feeling that we're all a bit… unarmed."

Max nodded, and Jack piped in; "I was in a part of the market dedicated to weapons. All blades of course, and I doubt they'd pierce Draco armor. But better than fuck all, which is what we have."

The three set off into the market. Kyle found himself watching Max with new eyes. Max, in some way, clearly had experience, judging by the way he carried himself through this alien environment with ease. Kyle made up his mind to treat Max with a bit more maturity. Max had grown in Kyle's estimation, and it wasn't just the age advancement.

The men found their way to the weapons market that Jack had spoken of. Jack and Max paid. It turned out they'd picked a few pockets in the crowded market, which was Jack's idea. Kyle was slightly horrified, both at the idea itself, and that Max had been recruited into it. But it was survival, he also realized.

The weaponry on offer, as Jack had said, was all blades-ceramic and crystal, with metal handles coated in a rubber-like material. Kyle, Jack, and Max bought what they could afford,

which meant only a few ceramic bladed weapons, with none of the fancy engravings found on many, and only those which they could fit under their clothing, even uncomfortably, though they were provided with complimentary pouches of a kind of dark green leather-like material, which made concealment a bit easier. Now armed, Kyle and company took off.

There were several kinds of transit available, as it turned out. Different kinds of hovering craft of various sizes were common, including open-topped buses of a bright orange color. A number of beings, mostly of the more humanoid species, drove hovering motorcycles. Other beings also rode large animals. These looked roughly like draft horses, of a dark greenish brown color, however they had curved horns like those of a ram. Kyle could tell they were synthetic. They had no scent, and produced no waste. In the end, the men chose to walk. They'd been given rather detailed directions by the Iguanoid vendor, and were feeling very distrustful of being recorded or seen more than necessary.

The walk was not long- no more than 1.5 miles, as the crow flies. They first exited the market district, and found themselves in an odd mix of architecture. In addition to buildings with bizarre glass roofs, they found that there were many pyramid shaped buildings, of varying sizes, colors, and materials, as well as a few buildings which looked like ancient Chinese architecture. These seemed the most incongruous- too Earthly for such a place.

It was not long before the men reached the so-called "Bellatrixese district." This was made up of pyramid shaped wooden

buildings, generally about 40 feet in height, and gray, though a few were bright red. This was the Bellatrixese architecture of the era. The Iguanoid woman had given them precise numbers of buildings per block, how many blocks to walk, and which house to call on once they'd reached the correct block. Useful, as there were no street names or addresses.

The men approached the house they had been directed to, and knocked on the door, which stood at about 15 feet in height. The door was answered by a Bellatrixese woman. I suppose it calls for a description of the species' typical appearance. Bellatrixese range from 8 to 11 feet in height, and are humanoid in shape, with elephant-like skin of a dark avocado green color. They have long, prehensile tails, and their ears are also long and narrow, like those of a horse, except that Bellatrixese ears reach almost to the shoulder, hanging loosely. Most Bellatrixese have black hair, however, other hair colors do exist. Their faces, while humanlike in general, have much larger eyes and smaller noses. Their eyes are typically deep blue, however, some have eyes in shades of gold and even pink.

The Bellatrixese woman looked down at the men, as even the tallest of them, Jack, was over two feet shorter than her.

"Yes?" The Bellatrixese woman asked. Telepathically, of course.

Kyle was who first piped up.

"You're the mother of Karaa? I believe you'll want to know Madam. Your daughter is likely in grave danger. From The Horde. We have come to offer her protection. May we come in?"

The Bellatrixese woman paused. She was clearly evaluating

the men, and that which they said. Seemingly finding no fault, she waved them in after a few seconds.

They entered into what looked rather the same as any house on Earth. Reclining chairs, a sofa, a coffee table, and a television. These of course were all considerably bigger than those made for Earth humans, however the principles and aesthetic remained the same. Kyle was particularly struck by all this existing in the time period. How true rang the expression; “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

The Bellatrixese woman called down both her husband (whose name they learned was Salafi) and Karaa. The mother’s name, it turned out, was Ikron. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to accurately describe, word by word, the six-way conversation which followed, switching between telepathy and the Bellatrixese language. I will say the result, which is that somehow, Kyle and his companions, with pure persuasion, managed to convince Salafi, Ikron, and Karaa of their mission, of Karaa’s future importance, and that it was necessary that they leave.

Bags were packed, and the family of Salafi, Ikron, and Karaa followed the men out of the house, for a return to the market district, in order to find a ship to Bellatrix, which Kyle had decided was necessary. Not only was Bellatrix not yet occupied, but Karaa and her parents would blend in far better in their home system. As they left, Kyle noticed something; it had been approximately sunset when they arrived. It was still sunset now. The planet they were on must be tidally locked, he realized.

On their reentrance to the market district, the group

observed a cluster of perhaps five black craft, each roughly 30 feet in length and in the shape of a pyramid laid on one side. These craft were landing to one side of the market district.

“Draco visitors. Fuck. Everyone just keep your distance,” Jack said nervously.

The group walked to the market district. At the sight of the descending craft, nearly everyone on the streets began ducking into buildings. Whatever building was nearest to them- they didn’t seem to care. The sounds of city life also died down considerably. These people were scared of their occupiers.

The men and the family of Karaa reached the market square. The crowding was tight, as many people had pulled to the sides, allowing the Draco party to pass through. The Draco were mostly of the warrior caste. Large, muscular bodies, of dark green, with heads like those of a crocodile. Towering above them were a few royal caste Draco. This was Kyle’s first sight of these. They stood at about 18 feet in height, with bright white, shiny scales. Their heads were lizard like, and they had massive wings folded at their backs. Large enough to fly, Kyle estimated.

It started peacefully enough, though the air was tense. The Draco began passing through the market, keeping their distance as the market goers also did. Kyle had not been aware yet, but there was a reason for this, beyond colonial fear- namely that a Draco, through no fault of their own, puts out such extreme psionic energy that most species cannot handle proximity to them, and will eventually die in their presence.

It wasn’t long before the situation turned. An Iguanoid vendor, possibly even the same one who had attended to Kyle

and company, stepped from the crowd and strode head-on towards the Draco party, her hand, or rather claw, outstretched, as if to welcome the occupiers. In their arrogance, the occupiers also made their way towards her. The Iguanoid took her opportunity, drawing from beneath her robe a narrow wooden gun. A black powder gun, Kyle guessed, during the split yet seemingly unending second in which the Iguanoid raised the gun and fired. Her aim was true, and the massive bullet rocketed out of the gun, landing squarely in the center of the chest of one of the royals. And then, naturally, all hell broke loose.

Instantly, the Iguanoid was charged. Two of the warrior caste Draco grabbed her, one on each arm, and pulled, ripping the Iguanoid in half lengthwise. Kyle turned and attempted to cover Karaa's eyes- too late, he realized. And the crowd wasn't taking it lying down. This was clearly an organized effort. More guns began to be drawn, and Kyle and company plunged into the market stalls, seeking cover as they made their way to the shipyard. Each of the men gripped a member of Karaa's family, with Kyle hanging onto Karaa herself, telepathically using every means at his disposal to calm her and keep her quiet.

As they were weaving through the market, Ikron met her untimely end. A bullet sailed well past the conflict zone and into the waiting head of Ikron, who was holding onto Max, who simply stood shell-shocked, as Salafi began to scream in rage, dragged along by Jack. Kyle turned Karaa away, and ordered her to run to Salafi and Jack, which she miraculously obeyed. Kyle then turned to the shellshocked Max.

Kyle: "Kid. We have to move! Now!

Max: “I was holding onto her. She’s… dead.”

Feeling horrible about it, Kyle slapped Max’s now drained face.

“You want to end up like her? No? Then move your fucking ass!” Kyle screamed. He felt terrible guilt. But it had the intended effect. Max dropped Ikron’s lifeless hand and moved.

What followed is a blur. A seemingly endless weave through endless market stalls and bodies of those also hiding and attempting to escape, with the conflict raging in the central square. More craft began to descend from the Draco mothership parked in the sky. At one point, Kyle and Jack discussed the possibility of stealing one of these ships. After all, it was unlikely that they’d be stopped in a Draco ship. However, once they reached Bellatrix, they realized they most certainly would, and would likely be shot down, as the occupation of Bellatrix had yet to occur. And so they continued to the ship sellers.

All through the rush, one of the men had a grip on Karaa. However, as Salafi was not the priority, at some point he was simply lost in the crush. It’s unknown whether Karaa ever saw him again.

The ship sellers’ section of the market was a good distance from the center of the market, and therefore, away from the conflict. Quite a number of ships of different kinds were parked here, awaiting sale. These were all smaller craft, for personal or family use. The sellers were of multiple species, and were crouched around their ships. Jack, apparently knowing well what he was doing, directed them towards a Rigelian ship.

The Rigelian ship was noticeably larger than the others, and

spherical, standing on four legs. It was about 30 feet across at its widest point, and was a matte bluish silver, with a segmented silver band around the middle. Kyle found it very pretty. It reminded him of a giant Christmas tree ornament. With Jack leading, this was the ship they moved towards, and spoke, telepathically of course, to the elderly Rigelian man who crouched at the base of its four legs.

Jack: “We wish to buy this ship and leave immediately.”

Rigelian man: “At a time like this? You want to buy a ship?”

Kyle: “Yes. Is she functional?”

Rigelian man: “If you have the payment, it’s in whatever shape you like.”

Without another word, Jack reached atop his head and pulled out a few hairs, then walked over to Max and Kyle and pulled a few hairs from their heads. These he handed over to the Rigelian man.

Jack: “Will this cover the cost of the ship?”

Rigelian man: “For that payment, I would give a dozen ships.”

“This one will do. Now, may we please be on our way?” Max demanded impatiently.

The Rigelian man nodded and turned to the ship. In one of the silver legs which raised the ship about 10 feet off the ground was a compartment. The Rigelian opened it and inserted the hairs given to him, then a few seconds later, reopened it and took the hairs out again. A platform descended, hovering just a few inches off the ground. Kyle, Jack, Max, and Karaa stepped onto the platform, after which it ascended into

the Rigelian ship.

The party emerged in a tube, which led further up the ship via a ladder. Kyle went first, as always. He found himself on the bridge. He realized this must be the very middle of the ship. The rest domed above him. To his right was a console containing two chairs, and along the rest of the curved wall was a single long, white bench.

“All clear,” Kyle called out to the others, and began to examine the flight console.

The console was in two parts. One was the pilot’s seat, with a joystick and steering wheel, rather small for a Terran. The other simply had a large hole by the seat, for the insertion of an arm, judging by the diagram present. Kyle was reminded of “The Final Domicile of Kanshi,” and surmised that upon inserting one’s arm in the hole, a needle would be inserted, connecting the user to the ship’s AI. The person in the actual pilot’s seat would do the flying.

“Right,” Kyle said. “Who will be the pilot? There’s going to be quite a lot of guesswork involved, I can tell already.”

Karaa stepped forward.

“May I try, Sir? What even is your name?” Karaa asked. She spoke aloud, in the Bellatrixese tongue.

Kyle smiled. “I’m Kyle. These are Jack and Max with me. We’re here to look after you for a bit. You’re going to be very important someday. But for now, I don’t think you should be flying ships.”

Karaa simply nodded and sat. Judging by her rather dazed and “out of it” state, she had not yet processed the fact that her

parents were not present, and that at least one of them never would be present again.

Max stepped forward next, and assured Kyle that he would be able to fly the ship. Apparently he'd already studied such things in simulation. Kyle at last inserted his arm, and winced as he felt a long needle be inserted into his arm. Almost instantly, he felt the computer enter his mind, and he entered into its mind. They were in symbiosis- Kyle was able to give orders to the ship, and it gave him the necessary information. Once Max was (uncomfortably) seated in the pilot's seat, Kyle followed instructions, and reached over to hold Max's hand. And so Max too was in symbiosis with the ship, and with Kyle.

"Where am I headed?" Max asked.

"Bellatrix Secunda. The third planet," Jack said, and began rattling off coordinates as Max lifted the ship up, and shot out of the atmosphere of Saiph. They were not shot down.

Kyle and Max navigated, and were rather in their own little telepathic bubble, along with the ship's AI. Jack kept Karaa company. The ship's engine, it turned out, was of the warp variety, and so moved in a blue bubble, the outside of which could not be seen, even with the outside view facilitated by the ship's AI, and so Kyle and Max's navigation was contingent entirely on maps. The ship's map system proved to be very dynamic, steering them around any checkpoints. In the end, it took approximately six hours to reach Bellatrix Secunda.

A word on the nature of Bellatrix Secunda; what has been undiscovered, of covered up, is that Bellatrix, a blue supergiant, is part of a very loose binary system. The blue supergiant

known as Bellatrix is orbited very loosely and languidly by an orange dwarf, which has its own planetary system. This is the system where Kyle and company aimed. Upon reaching it, Jack rattled off further coordinates.

The new coordinates reached, the ship stopped moving for a few moments, then the domed part above the occupants' heads lit up, turning into a large screen displaying the outside view. The ship rotated for a few minutes, giving a panorama of the planet, which they were in lower orbit of. The planet was heavily oceanic, dotted with archipelagos. Eventually, the ship turned upright again, facing the stars, and began to descend into the atmosphere, the AI transmitting to Kyle and Max that the landing gear was lowering.

They landed on the beach of a large mountainous island. The ship AI disconnected from Kyle and Max, and Kyle turned to Jack.

Kyle: "Alright. Now where are we? Besides Bellatrix."

Jack: "In 30,000 years, I work a dig at these approximate coordinates. I know that in this time period, there are some tribal groups in the area. We'll be undisturbed."

Max: "Sounds as good a place as any."

Karaa: "Its strange. I've never been to my home system."

Kyle: "How old are you, Karaa?"

Karaa: "On Saiph I'm nine years old. I don't know about on your planet. Where did you say it was?"

Kyle smiled. "I'll tell you sometime soon Kid. We'd best get moving."

The group stood on the platform which lowered to the

ground. It was only at this point that it occurred to Kyle that they hadn't given their smartsuits enough credit. At no point did Max or Jack complain of a need for food or the toilet, nor did anyone get tired. Karaa did not wear a smartsuit, however when Kyle asked about her lack of needs, it turned out that her body was full of nanites.

The pad landed on the beach, and the group stepped into about a half inch of water, and with Jack's direction, moved toward the mountains. The beach itself was flat and even, however, just beyond it, the topography became jagged. The area was dominated by black, rough rocks, interspersed with dark green flowering plants, and eventually tall, palm-like trees with dark greenish blue foliage.

It was as they were entering the mountains that they were discovered. A young Bellatrixese child, playing alone among the trees, saw them, and ran into the mountains. The others made no moves to stop him. They were here to join the civilization, after all. So they simply stood and waited.

It wasn't long before they heard voices, in a rather archaic (even for the times) Bellatrixese dialect, and soon enough, the tribe appeared. They were led by large men, carrying bows. The travelers all calmly put their hands up.

"What is your business here?" demanded one of the bow carriers. He did not raise his bow, however.

"We are here in business of the future and your king. This girl needs asylum. But we need to stay out of site, for the time being," Jack said calmly.

Several women stepped then forward. This tribe, it should be

noted, all wore dark green togas which just came up to the knee. The women who came forward made eye contact with the newcomers and simply scanned their minds.

“You are different,” the woman examining Kyle said. “Different from both the girl and the other men.”

“Oh?” Kyle said. “Yes, I believe so. I’m much more handsome, don’t you think?”

Far be it for Kyle not to flirt with a woman, even of a species he found actively unattractive and was unsure of the anatomical properties of.

The woman clicked her tongue twice. A Bellatrixese eye roll.

“No. You’re different in… another way. But you’re the most honest in your party. You pass.” she said.

Everyone passed, eventually. And so Karaa and the men were led to the tribal housing.

The homes were very simple, wooden affairs, as well as caves set into the mountains. These were set around a large community garden, next to which was a large collection of spits for roasting, as well as massive stone cauldrons. A cabin stood at the edge of the settlement, recently vacated, according to one of the tribe women. Kyle, Jack, and Max were placed in this cabin, while Karaa was taken away by two members of the tribe.

I must apologize to the reader for the lack of names here. They were of little importance in this telepathic society, and so have not been committed to memory.

Kyle and the others found green togas the same as those worn by the people of the tribe. Out of respect, they put them on, though of course they had to do considerable improvisation

to wear them and not have them drag on the ground, in the end shortening the togas with their blades, and then tying the togas on using the straps for their weapons to hold their togas on. They then settled in to discuss what to do going forward. It was evening already, and soon enough, the sounds and smells of cooking began to waft into the cabin, and Kyle and the others drifted out.

The food was delicious, if alien. The men stuck to the meats and fish. They had no idea if they could trust the fruits and vegetables. The group was an object of curiosity for a while, of course. That is, until they found the thing which made them relate to Bellatrix- music. It turned out that the Bellatrixese tribes played what sounded very much like European folk music, on instruments essentially identical to erhus, guitars, and banjos. And so, the Terran men could settle in very well.

As it turned out, they lived on Bellatrix Secunda for nearly a Bellatrix Secunda year, holed up in the mountain village. The years here lasted 250 days, of 18 hours each. They took to training Karaa for her coming role. They taught her how to fight, how to fish, and managed, with the help of a tribesman, to construct a gun of some sort. It was really more of a tubular crossbow, but it got the idea across. While Kyle, Max, and Jack trained Karaa, she lived among the tribe, and was adopted by one tribeswoman named Anasha.

It was also here that Max's songwriting truly blossomed for the first time. While he, in concert with Kyle and Jack, wrote several songs on Bellatrix Secunda, there is one which stands out, both in my memory and in general quality. It was influ-

enced by a few comics which he had read with Andrew while at Camp Hero. Kyle and Jack helped perfect it, both in lyrics and in music, and then played it. Jack strummed one of the guitar-like instruments, Kyle bowed one of the erhu-like instruments, while Max sang.

Wish I was, oooh
A Wild West hero

Sometime I look up high, and then I think there might
Just be a better life
Away from all we know
That's where I want to go
Out on the wild side

And I wish I was
Oh-oh-oh-oh
A Wild West hero

Ride the range all the day
Till the first fading light
Be with my western girl, round the fire oh so bright

I'd be the Indian's friend
Let them live to be free
Riding into the sunset
I wish I could be……

I'd ride the desert sands
And through the prairie lands
Tryin' to do what's right
The folks would come to me, they'd say; "We need you here"
I'd stay there for the night

Oh I wish I was
Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh
A Wild West hero

Ride the range all the day
Till the first fading light
Be with my western girl, round the fire oh do bright
I'd be the Indians friend
Let them live to be free
Riding into the sunset
I wish I could be……

Oh I wish was
Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh
A Wild West hero

The mission came to an abrupt end one day. Kyle was out hunting in the woods, as was the norm, he and the others rotating such duties. He heard running footsteps, which frightened away the large, green, boar-like animal he was hunting. He turned, annoyed, to the Bellatrixese tribesman who had rushed to him.

“It’s Karaa. She’s in bad shape. Come, quickly!” was the tribesman’s message. Kyle dropped his bow and bounded after the man.

They returned to the village, and at last arrived at Anasha’s dwelling, which was set into the side of one of the mountains. Karaa was laid out on one of the cots which was ubiquitous here. Her expelled stomach contents were on the ground. Her skin had turned more blue than green. Jack was already in the room, and Max showed up soon after. Anasha stood over Karaa, who seemed only vaguely conscious.

“What the fuck?” Kyle said.

“It’s her nanites. She needs an upgrade. Her body is dependent on them,” Jack said.

“Fuck. We need to get her to”… Max stopped himself from saying “civilization,” but the others knew this was what he meant.

A few moments later, Kyle, Max, and Jack all received a telepathic message. Jimmy’s “voice” from across space and time. He bore a simple message.

“Is it time?”

The men responded as one.

“Yes.”

They weren’t sure what Jimmy meant, but it certainly seemed time for something. Kyle pulled Anasha aside.

Kyle: “Dear lady, I need to ask you to please leave this house. And take the spectators away.”

A large number of onlookers had gathered in the doorway.

Anasha: “And why should I? The girl is sick. She needs my

attention!”

Kyle: “She needs attention you cannot give her. I and my men must take her away. Immediately. I swear that she will be returned. She has a destiny to fulfill to your people and your planet.”

Anasha: “And by what authority do you swear this?”

Kyle: “By the future. And by the Gods. Good woman, you know this to be true.”

She didn’t of course. Kyle did not even know the gods of the Bellatrixese pantheon, nor would he have believed in them. At this point in his life, Kyle was a militant atheist. But Anasha trusted him somehow, and, visibly frightened for Karaa’s life, left the little abode, more or less ordering the spectators to leave with her. Kyle took Karaa into his arms, whispering comforts into her ear in Bellatrixese, though whether she heard them is unknown.

A few moments later, a portal opened in one wall of Anasha’s abode, and the party rushed through, finding themselves, sure enough, in the portal room of Camp Hero. Dr. Simmons stood by, with a hovering stretcher and a trauma team. Jack rattled off some medical gibberish, and Karaa was rushed away to be tended to. Jimmy stood in a doorway, and beckoned Kyle, Jack, and Max over.

It turned out that their mission was complete. Karaa would be returned via portal to the tribe, once she’d had a dip in the regeneration tank. Through historical records, the exact date of her illness was known, hence the interception. The incident in the market had lit a spark in Karaa. A spark of resistance, which

would lead to her ultimate role as a resistor to the Draco, when they at last reached Bellatrix. This resistance would ultimately fail. However, it would alter the path of history, hence why Karaa is still an almost deified figure among the people of Bellatrix, down to this day.

The men were about to turn and head for the medical annex themselves when Jimmy stopped them.

"Max," Jimmy said with a wicked grin, "have you ever been an adult man before?"

"No," Max replied. "Not in body, at any rate. Why?"

"Did your old man introduce you to a thing called alcohol?" Jimmy asked.

Kyle fairly snorted. "I can see where this is going. Go on Max. You won't be a man much longer, Mi Pequeño. Not once the medical team finishes with Karaa and it's our turns in the tank."

Max smiled, as did Jimmy.

"Perfect! You all can come with me. I have a bottle of Corelian in my office," Jimmy said.

And so Kyle, Jack, and Max went to Jimmy's office, and Kyle got to see Max have his first taste of alcohol. However, Max had already grown exponentially as a person in Kyle's mind. He saw his boy in a far more mature light, watching him in a man's body, yet unchanged in personality, and fitting so seamlessly into both.

In Jimmy's office, they spoke of several things. Of the epoch they had just returned from. Of Max's growth. And now, for the first time (at least with Kyle, Jack, or Max present) they spoke of something new altogether- resistance.

Author's note. I apologize to the reader for the lack of detail on certain topics which they may have found intriguing. I struggle to describe a telepathic society and culture in a way that is understandable even to myself. I also feel the need to point out that the names such as "Bellatrix" of course did not exist at the time which this chapter takes place in. I use it for my own convenience, as I'm not confident enough in my understanding of Orionite tongues to use the correct names.

Chapter 16

Resistance- a loaded and often overused word. In modern times, it is often used to denote anyone who slightly strays from the norm, or has a differing idea from “the masses,” even if the idea is in fact fairly standard, or would serve to drag things backward, rather than forward. This tends to cheapen the historical significance of the word, which was so often steeped in danger. And the resistance at Camp Hero was certainly no exception.

Any city has an “alternative” scene, which Camp Hero, with a population of nearly 300,000, certainly qualified as. While much music was played both in the concert hall (which most had no access to) and in the barracks, the resistance met under the guise of playing music and being with friends. Jimmy was who organized these meetings.

The meetings themselves took place, in ultimate irony, within easy view of Nicholas’s home, around its backside. Behind the house were gardens, and behind the gardens was a kind of park. Winding paths of wood patches and little patches of wildflowers. This park had no formal name at the time. It was in theory open to the Camp Hero public, but in practice, enjoyed mostly by the upper class- the targets of the resistance. Holding meetings here served as both a kind of “middle finger” to the targets, and as a cover. In their arrogance,

the upper class of Camp Hero never thought to look for subversion within their own space.

These meetings were held every Thursday. They met at a sort of roundabout in the paths, at the center of which was a circle of grass. In the center of the circle was a large, reddish-brown rock. This rock, according to Ivan Roth, was once the point of meeting for the Fowler Tribe, who had lived on Long Island before their extermination by the English. It seemed a fitting place for planning an uprising.

The resistance meetings were attended, in rotating batches, by perhaps 200 individuals. Meetings were kept to 40 or less at a time. Kyle and Max attended, after their invite by Jimmy, as did both Flynns, as well as the Foster-Mittelbraun family, and both Roths, though Sondra was far more reliable in her attendance. Angelique also participated, and would tell stories of her home country's successful slave revolt in the late 1700s. These meetings were often the only times Kyle saw Danny, as he had been assigned to some far off part of the base which Kyle couldn't access. Tsurabaya also attended.

It was here that Kyle finally met Anastasia Trent, the young woman with long, wild red hair whose image was pinned in the middle of so many framed album covers in the recording studio. She spoke with a thick Texas drawl, it turned out. She was usually the one bringing the most cheer to each meeting she attended, though she and Kyle kept their distance, due to politics. However, Anastasia, thanks to frequent off-world musical tours, including in the present era (at time of events), was likely the most in tune with the outside situation.

Kyle also met Samantha Li, the Hong Konger whose angelic voice he had heard coming from the concert hall within moments of arriving at Camp Hero. Kyle, for all his general macho airs, turned to jelly when she sang. As it happened, she was also a very gifted remote viewer, and would serve as the lookout for the meetings whenever a sensitive topic was discussed, which was most of them.

Considered central to the resistance were “The Few.” Those rare individuals (at the time, all children) capable of operating the navigation chair which opened the portals through which missions occurred. Mark Muehlbauer counted among these, and Jimmy would bring him to the meetings, along with his brother Anthony, though Anthony was not part of “The Few.” It turned out that “The Few” had their own barracks. A handful of other names of “The Few” worth mentioning;

. Sally Graham
. Kelly Berger
. Joseph Crowne
. David Peary
. Hanna Steinel
. Gerhard Koenig

These are all “The Few” members whom Kyle can recall being in attendance at these resistance meetings of 1986. However, their stories, the little that’s known about them, were yet to be known by Kyle, so I’ll refrain from relating them here.

There was, of course, disagreement among the resistance. They were divided into two main camps. Those who advocated that Project Phoenix be continued after a revolution, and its

goals be changed under new management, founded on the idea that if they did not do it, someone else would. This camp was led by several prominent persons, such as Jimmy, Norma Jean, Sondra, and the majority in the resistance. For argument's sake, we'll call this camp the "Revisionists." Kyle fell into this camp, as did most he was close to at the time.

The second camp advocated for the destruction of Project Phoenix. This camp wished, after the inevitable revolution, for the program, and all technology contained within it, to be obliterated, and the assets redistributed to more hospitable places within time and space, with Project Phoenix in their past. This camp was led by Ivan Roth and Angelique primarily. Nancy Berg also fell in this camp. Kyle and Nancy frequently clashed over this in private, as they had been meeting fairly regularly for sex, having taken a purely physical interest in each other when in resistance meetings. For argument's sake, we'll call this camp the "Destructionists."

Also discussed at these meetings was the matter of the perpetrators. The two head offenders (Nicholas, real name Preston Nichols, and Dr. Simmons) were, of course, constant topics of conversation. However, other perpetrators were discussed too, many of whom Kyle had yet to meet. These included:

–Colonel John B. Constantine, Director of Training. Responsible for the violent training methods so often employed. (This is an alias, as the man is still living and a public figure. However it is close enough that I'm sure many can figure it out.)

–Adelaide Dupree, Paramilitary Captain. She, in addition to often being the one handing down orders for the most violent

missions, was infamous for her appetite for teenage boys. Several men at the resistance meetings spoke, through tears, of her abuses against them in their teenage years.

–Daniel Chan, Head of the Historicity Department. The historicity department was dedicated to the scouring of historical records to find the most ideal outcomes for missions. In addition to owning several child slaves (whom he often led around on leashes), Chan was infamous for handing down orders to carry out genocides and kill certain historical individuals in childhood, simply to expedite the process.

–Alfred Bielek, Courier. There were many at Camp Hero who carried the rank of "Courier," most of whom were very low ranked and relatively innocent. Bielek, however, was Nicholas's personal courier, bringing him children for his personal use, and even more infamously, was the organizer of the "supply runs," described earlier in this volume.

–Joan Goldberg, Director of Punishments. Perhaps the most obvious title, Goldberg's role was to dream up new and ever more evil punishments and torments for those who stepped the slightest bit out of line.

Other names were passed around of individuals who were outside of this elite, such as the officers who carried out the punishments, people who handed down orders (including Kyle's own station chief), etcetera. The finger was also often pointed at Ivan Roth. While he claimed to have reformed, and while few, if any, in the resistance were truly clean, Ivan was such an elite that his reform was doubted, not aided by the widespread knowledge of his violence toward his wife. Angelique also had a

far from clean or forgettable past, having at one point worked within the punishment block.

The rate that the resistance was advancing at was slow. It had to be. In that period, it was mostly focused on weapons. Many people carried them as part of their jobs. However, they were required to leave them in their desks at the end of the day. But smuggling or stashing a few things at a time was doable. A box of buckshot or a couple of combat knives were unlikely to be noticed missing, or if they were, they'd probably be shrugged off, and they could easily be hidden in some out-of-the-way place.

Also a key focus was the delicate art of psionic shielding and compartmentalization. The lack of privacy, even within one's own mind, became an even larger problem than it normally was. During the meetings, Anya Mittelbraun would often give classes on these subjects. She taught the members of the resistance a technique of creating boxes within one's mind to put thoughts in, and locking the boxes so no one could access them. A classic technique for a reason.

The resistance adopted an anthem. A song which seemed the most symbolic of their freedom.

Allons enfants de la patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'etendard sanglant est levé
L'etentard sanglant est levé
Entendez-vous dans les campagnes

Mugir féroces soldats?
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras
Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes

Aux armes, citoyens
Formez vos batallions
Marchons, marchons
Qu'un sang impur
Aubreve nos sillons!

Français, en guerriers manganimes
Portez ou retenez vos coups!
Empargnez ces tristes victimes
À regret s'armant contre nous
A regret s'armant contre nous
Mais ces despotes sanguinaires
Mais ces complices de Bouillé
Tous ces tigres qui, sans pitié
Déchirent le sein de leur mère!

Aux armes, citoyens
Formez vos batallions
Marchons, marchons
Qu'un sang impur
Aubreve nos sillons!

Amour sacre de la Patrie
Conduis, soutiens nos bras vengeurs

Liberté, liberté chérie
Combats avec tes défenseurs
Combats avec tes défenseurs!
Sous nos drapeaux que la victoire
Accoure à tes mâles accents
Que tes ennemis expirants
Voient ton triomphe et noitre gloire!

Aux armes, citoyens
Formez vos batallions
Marchons, marchons
Qu'un sang impur
Aubreve nos sillons

Max's ninth birthday was celebrated at a resistance meeting, and La Marseillaise (the name of the above song) was what he heard that year, rather than "Happy Birthday." His birthday present was five Beretta M9 clips to hide where he saw fit. The end was well and truly nigh.

Author's note. A fairly brief chapter, however, it ranks as one of the most important in the book. I hope the reader understands its gravity.

Chapter 17

This next chapter will focus on a set of three missions which occurred in the final days of the Reign of Terror. I have chosen to condense these into a single chapter, due to the heavy subject matter that has made me have little desire to write them in detail.

The first was a brief retrieval mission in Sengoku era Japan. The operation began in August of 1986.

Kyle was sitting at his desk, as on any other day. His computer lit up, and he checked it to see that he had been given a directive to report to the portal room immediately. With a shrug, Kyle picked up his guns and marched to the portal room.

What Kyle saw, as they say, "set him off." A young boy with golden blonde hair and blue eyes sat in the navigation chair, having clearly recently used it, as he was in the visibly dazed state that one is always in when one has just finished operating a hyperspace navigational system.

Ivan Roth stood over the boy, screaming at the top of his lungs; "Where the fuck is she? Where did you send her? Answer me, you little fuckhole!"

Roth then stepped back and slapped the boy so hard that the boy was thrown halfway from the chair. Kyle, being what he was, snapped.

"Hey!" Kyle screamed as he entered the room, reaching out

with telekinesis and snatching Roth off the boy and shoving him to the ground.

“Run. Hide.” Kyle telepathically said hurriedly to the boy, who somehow recovered and was able to do as Kyle said, rushing off.

Ivan Roth stood, recovering himself. However, Kyle was still approaching, and as Roth turned, Kyle delivered a sharp upward kick to the crotch. He heard the reassuring sound of Roth’s reinforced pubic bone breaking in at least five places, and Roth collapsed. Kyle was not through, however. He moved on to using his telekinesis to tighten Roth’s airway, causing Roth to be in pain in the throat as well as the crotch, and unable to breathe. Roth looked up at Kyle, almost beseechingly. But Kyle had no mercy.

“What the fuck? What’s going on? And why was I called?” A Swedish-accented woman demanded from the doorway of the portal room.

Kyle at last released Roth, who by now was turning blue from lack of oxygen.

“Fuck you,” Roth said in a strained voice, and then began gasping for breath and coughing violently.

“You’re not my type. Why don’t you fuck yourself?” Kyle shot back in disgust, and at last turned.

Kyle saw that the Swedish accent belonged to a muscular woman in full Air Force uniform, with close-cropped dark hair. Kyle guessed she was a lesbian, or, as he’d have probably said at the time, “degenerate.” Her name was Colleen Johansson.

“My wife. She fucked off to some place. I called you, Kyle, to

retrieve her. And I called you, Carol, to tell me where the fuck she is!" Roth screamed, in between coughs.

"It's Colleen. But yes, I have an inkling," Colleen said.

Kyle would later learn that Colleen had been friends with Sondra since childhood. Colleen was, like Sondra, one of the originals brought during the early days of the Reign of Terror.

Colleen explained that the previous night, she and Sondra had been chatting, and Sondra had been showing Colleen an illustrated book on the top sword collectors in Sengoku Period Japan. She had been drawn to a particular Masamune Sword, cataloged as being in some collection or other in 1560, in a town near Osaka. Colleen stated that Sondra had expressed her plans for taking a quick trip there, with the intent of buying or (more likely) stealing the sword, using the cover of being a Goanese Catholic missionary.

"When in 1560?" Roth demanded.

"In case you've forgotten, the computer tracks all movements of the wormhole," Colleen said tiredly. "And where is the staff?"

It was only then that Kyle also noticed the lack of staff. Roth must have cleared them all out, likely so that the boy in the chair, whomever he might be, would not be comforted by the presence of medics or sympathetic staff.

Soon enough, Colleen and Kyle returned with the medical personnel. Roth, who was still laid on the portal room's concrete floor, was whisked away by the medics. While another of "The Few" was retrieved, Kyle went away and was dressed in clothing suitable for a Portuguese merchant in 1560, and then

went through the portal. To Kyle's relief, the child brought in was different from the one who had fled. That boy would likely hide for a few days, then make his way back to his barracks, the incident forgotten. This was the usual procedure.

Kyle emerged in some woods, from which he could make out a beach, and in the distance, the sounds of commerce. Kyle walked to the beach, and looked down it southward. It was a clear summer day, and not far down the beach, Kyle could see a fishing village. Further along, the scenery was dotted with more fishing villages, and near the edge of what Kyle could see, was a huge port. Osaka, he guessed.

Kyle set off down the beach, reaching the village, where he, in broken Japanese with a Portuguese accent, asked for information on a Goanese Catholic female missionary. No one at this village knew, so Kyle walked to the next one. At the third village, he was at last given directions to a house on a hill several miles inland, one reserved for missionaries.

Kyle found the house quite easily. It was small, two-story, and of traditional Japanese architecture. It was unmistakable because of the large wooden cross which rose from within the garden, which was behind a fence that surrounded the house. Kyle found the gate unlocked and entered, then walked up the path through the tiny stone garden up to the small Japanese house.

The house was as one would expect. The rice paper door was hanging open, and Kyle entered after removing his boots, rather horrified at Sondra's lack of any security system. The house was empty, and Kyle waited for several hours before hearing foot-

steps in the garden. These footsteps stopped on the porch at the sight of Kyle's boots.

"I am not one of these heathen whores as you seem to think! I'm a woman of God!" Sondra's voice shouted, in Portuguese.

Sondra clearly thought, at the sight of these western boots, that one of the many Portuguese sailors in the area at the time had found his way here, intending to rape the lady of the house, as often occurred in this era.

Kyle did not respond, and soon heard the sound of a sword being drawn. He smiled, and ducked into a corner. Sondra stepped in, and before she could scan all the corners, Kyle stepped forward. Sondra turned with a skillful and deft swing of her sword. Were it not for Kyle's advanced reflexes, he'd have been cut in half lengthwise and unable to rapidly disarm Sondra.

"Fucking idiot. No alarms on the door. No nothing," Kyle said.

"It had to be you, Kyle" Sondra said with a roll of her eyes, and then began to show off her sword.

The sword was of the tachi variety, and was made by the legendary Masamune, likely the greatest sword maker in history. The sword was unique for being a tachi. While Masamune is known for having made many tachis, in the years after his death, they were all re-carved into swords of the katana type. When Sondra brought this sword to the modern era, it would be the only surviving example. Apparently, Camp Hero's elites took indulgent trips like this all the time.

As it turned out, Kyle was sent a full three weeks after Son-

dra had arrived. Likely a test to see if she would survive. Kyle and Sondra stayed several more hours. They were overdue for a meetup, for Kyle to give more names of people he had met and seen, in order for Sondra to plan her escape. While they talked, they practiced with Sondra's sword in the back garden. And then, on foot, they marched back through the portal, with Sondra keeping her sword.

By some bureaucratic miracle, Sondra was allowed to keep the sword. If it survives, it is a priceless historical relic.

The next mission I wish to relate is one which proved very traumatic for Kyle, and so I'll be skimming through it.

In this next mission, Kyle and perhaps 10 others, including Max, and Adelaide Dupree as mission head, were sent to the south of England, in Tudor times. Specifically, they were sent to assist Cromwell. This mission was initiated some time in late summer of 1986, either September or October.

The English aristocracy of the time, through occult means, were viewing what, from their perspective, was the future. They were aware of such things as supersoldiers, however they were unable to recreate them, due to the technological limits of that time. However, Project Phoenix was perfectly capable of traveling back to this time, making visitations and offering their services. In this case, they offered a batch to Cromwell, for use as spies and assassins.

Without going into great detail, Kyle and the others were housed in a large estate in Devonshire. At one point, Cromwell became suspicious of a possible mole within the group. Adelaide Dupree chose to prove her loyalty by killing one

member of the group with a battle axe. She chose Max.

Kyle did not witness the killing itself, as he was away from the house. However, he somehow sensed it, and returned to find Max's bloody, mutilated corpse in the house. This forced Kyle to carry Max on his shoulders for 10 miles in the baking summer sun, back to the portal so that Max could be regenerated. By the time they'd reached the portal, and therefore Camp Hero, Kyle was covered in so much of Max's blood that it looked as though he'd been swimming in it.

While Max was successfully regenerated, as his brainstem was intact, (the only requirement for a regeneration tank) this was a deeply traumatic experience for Kyle, as a father. To this day, Max has no memory of the death itself. However, it was also rather shocking for him, awakening from the tank and seeing his father standing by, desperately looking on, nearly unrecognizable from being coated in a layer of blood.

The final mission I wish to recount was a massive one in Budapest. I personally believe it to be the Budapest of an alternate universe, as the idea that all that happened could have been covered up after the fact without a trace stretches even my belief in the project's power. This mission left from late October of 1986.

The mission took place in the 1970s. A team of archaeologists had found a device underwater, within the Danube River. This device was a gold pyramid, and could view into the future and the past at the whim of the user. A Looking Glass, for all intents and purposes.

Kyle was sent on this mission alongside both Roths, as well

as Sondra's handler, Claudia Greene, mentioned in chapter 13. They also had many contacts already placed within Budapest, to help them in their proceedings, mostly MI6 operatives from Britain's own time travel program.

Kyle and Ivan Roth, during the course of this mission, were encouraged to open a club. The Asylum, they called it, and it played Camp Hero music. However, a Der Bund squad decided that this was unacceptable, and handed down orders for it to stop. When they did not, a large Men in Black squad arrived at the garage where they practiced, and smashed their instruments. Kyle's beloved red guitar, Lola, was a casualty.

Kyle also adopted a dog. A long-haired dachshund named Molly. She also was killed, after being hit by a car.

In addition to the club business, Kyle and Ivan also ran a tour guide business, and would often, by force, confiscate film from their tour groups. This was another requirement- no photographic evidence.

To get to the device itself, they needed access to the elites. In this instance, rather than being handed over to the military, the device was being passed around for use at parties by the high society of Budapest. The Asylum became the trendy place for such wild parties, which I will not describe in graphic detail. Over the course of these parties, the Project Phoenix team took meticulous photographs and notes on the device, which they passed up the chain of command via their glass pads.

One night, at one of these parties, a conversation transpired between Kyle and Sondra. Kyle was standing at the bar at some large house or other, when Sondra happened to walk next to

him, and order a simple Sprite.

"Off the sauce? At a time like this?" Kyle asked sardonically.

Sondra looked over at him.

"Not here," she said. "Meet me in the kitchen in 15 minutes."

His curiosity thoroughly piqued, Kyle did meet Sondra in the kitchen, exactly 15 minutes later.

Kyle: "What's going on?"

Sondra: "Well, Kyle, I suppose it's fair for you to be the first to know; the time has come. The names and information you've given to me have paid off."

Kyle: "Holy shit. You're following through with this, aren't you?"

Sondra: "Yes. I thought I could wait. But I cannot. I'm pregnant."

Kyle: "Oh. Yes, I see."

Sondra: "I'm keeping it. Ivan wants me to get rid of it, of course. Says he's concerned about well being, but we both know it's so he can pull one over on Nicholas, and be spared responsibility."

Kyle nodded.

Kyle: "Where will you go?"

Sondra: "I won't implicate you by telling you that. But this is goodbye, I suppose. I'll be gone in the morning."

Kyle: "I suppose it is goodbye."

Sondra: "I don't like you, Kyle. I don't like your politics, or the way you conduct yourself, or your attitude."

Kyle: "Since we're being honest here; I don't like you either."

Sondra: "But thank you for the help."

Kyle: “Thank you for the photographs.”

Sondra: “Well. Good luck, Kyle. You’re not a good man, except as a father. And for that, I wish you and your boy the best, even among the shit you live in.”

Kyle smiled.

“Same to you,” Kyle said. And to the party they returned. Soon enough, Sondra took to the microphone, and sang, strikingly, the following song:

I close my eyes
And drift away
To the distant sound of an old symphony

There I saw your face and recall the days
When you couldn’t find
Your melody

I can hear it now

I think I fell in love
With an illusion
I think I fell in love
With an illusion of you

Illusion of you
Illusion of you

Many moons I’ve passed

Since that winter's night
We poured our hearts out till the morning light

The wind blown chime
Break the lover's sigh
The big bad wolf has cried
Through many times

I can hear it now

I think I fell in love
With an illusion
I think I fell in love
With an illusion of you

Illusion of you
Illusion of you
Illusion of you!

I'll lend you my hand
Until the end
I'll lend you my shoulder
Until the end

I think I fell in love
With an illusion
I think I fell in love
With an illusion of you

Illusion of you
Illusion of you
Illusion of you!

After the party, everyone returned to their apartments. Kyle dressed for the next day, and simply sat on the couch, awaiting the inevitable fallout to play out.

It took longer than Kyle had expected, but the fallout came. Kyle smiled as he heard the sound of furniture being smashed within the Roths' apartment, and eventually, the sound of Greene screaming at Ivan to calm himself. Eventually, they burst into Kyle's apartment, and screamed at him for some time. Kyle didn't rise to it.

Eventually, once Ivan and Greene had collected themselves, Ivan produced a note Sondra had written. An address, on light blue paper, with instructions to head there at 6:00 PM and for Ivan to answer a collect call. There would also be a package for him, or so she said.

Green and Ivan searched the Roths' apartment, finding nothing. Sondra had taken a good deal of cash (which was all in untraceable notes, so this wasn't useful) and a few shirts and changes of underwear. Greene attempted to pull up Sondra's tracking implants on her glass pad, but found nothing. The implants were offline. There was nothing left to do but wait until they could leave to the address given to them.

When the time came, Kyle, Greene, and Ivan piled into the black Bentley, then drove to the mysterious address. They found

themselves in a peculiar suburban town, and the address proved to be a roller rink. Kyle did the driving, as Greene was too busy messaging this and that person on her glass pad. Ivan was too violently enraged to breathe, let alone drive a car.

They pulled into the roller rink just a few minutes before the scheduled call. Ivan calmed himself, and was able to quietly ask at the front for a package left for him. It turned out to be a small box, wrapped in blue paper. Ivan and Greene peeled away the paper, and found that it was a tiny locked box, with the key taped to the front.

Gingerly, the box was opened. Inside were three tiny objects. Two were plastic disks. The last appeared to be a tiny fishhook with four hooked parts. Rather disturbingly, all were coated in dried blood.

"What the fuck?" Ivan said.

"Her tracking implants. She cut them out. And this box is lined with led. That's why I couldn't track them," Greene said, her voice dripping with hatred. Kyle suppressed a grin.

Eventually, the collect call did come in, and the man behind the desk of the rink called out to Ivan, who rounded the desk and accepted the call on the ancient rotary wall mounted telephone. Whatever precisely went down on the phone call, we shall most likely never know. But Ivan Roth turned from the phone looking the most shell-shocked that Kyle had ever seen him as he wordlessly avoided both Kyle and Greene, heading straight back for the car. Kyle got in the driver's seat, Greene got in back, and unlike before, so did Ivan.

No sooner had Greene and Ivan taken their seats than Ivan

once again exploded, reaching over and choking Greene in her seat.

“I know what you did.” Ivan said, in a slow, terrifyingly calm voice, and then promptly released Greene.

Kyle once again suppressed a grin as he caught what was happening. Sondra had clearly chosen to pinpoint Greene as the one responsible for helping her to escape. Kyle instinctively also knew she’d have left evidence of this.

Greene put in a few more calls on her glass pad, and very abruptly, the mission was called off. Kyle, Greene, and Ivan were instructed to drive to some woods outside Budapest, and there, they found a portal waiting for them. They went through and, as expected, found themselves back at Camp Hero.

They were interrogated, of course. Kyle, Greene, and even Ivan, in his position of power, were all taken to a dark room and questioned by a Draco. However, Anya’s training held true for Kyle, and even the deepest probe by the Draco didn’t reach his knowledge of Sondra’s escape. After six hours, Kyle was cleared, having made implications against Greene, and he was allowed to head to his barracks, as it was already lights out. Before being released, he was given a gag order not to speak on this.

Kyle broke his gag order that very night, telling Max the entire story that night telepathically, as Max lay on the bunk beneath his, and further ordered Max to tell the story of Sondra’s escape to the other children.

Claudia Greene was never seen again. Years later, Kyle would learn that she had been executed for treason. Ivan Roth also vanished, although in a few months, he would reappear, having

put in for an immediate transfer, which he could do, with his monstrous clout.

Sondra's successful escape, disseminated by Kyle and Max, changed Camp Hero. It proved to be the death knell for this era of Project Phoenix. While the flame of resistance had been lit for years, the story of a successful escape lit an ever more dangerous and important flame- Revolution.

Author's Note. Another essential chapter. The end part is well worth remembering, in particular, as we move into the final stretch of this book.

Chapter 18

Sondra's escape was not to be permanent, of course. However, before her dramatic return is to be discussed, we must discuss the conditions which befell Camp Hero at the time.

Missions lessened. Kyle would go for days, and sometimes over a week, without being sent out. The security and integrity of these missions was no longer trusted, and escape attempts went through the roof. Camp Hero fell under something akin to martial law, with people being questioned almost daily by their station chiefs. "Supply runs" also essentially halted. Kyle became more accustomed to guarding parts of the base than of guarding operatives on missions, and generally, Max and Andrew would accompany him to do this, as no one in the departments they usually frequented was working. Transfers out of the base increased greatly, causing a major staffing shortage.

Kyle was relieved when, on his glass pad, he saw a directive that the next day he was to be leaving the base for a few days on Emmermann business. It was, by then, December 1986. However, before this, there was to be one final event. One last hurrah for the Reign of Terror.

On the night of December 17th, Kyle was on his way back to the barracks from wherever he had been posted guard that day. As it happened, his route back took him past the portal room.

He heard activity- this was surprising, not only because of the general lack of missions, but due to the late hour. Out of curiosity, Kyle entered the portal room.

Kyle saw several uniformed Air Force personnel crowded around the portal, obviously anticipating an arrival. And they got one. But likely not the one they had hoped for.

Through the portal came four people. Three women, in a tight triangle formation around a smaller person who could not be seen. In the front was Sondra. To the sides were two other women whom Kyle did not recognize. One was tall and blonde. The other shorter, stocky, and Middle Eastern. Only the legs of the fourth person could be seen. They were light brown, and unmistakably those of a young boy. All three women had M16 rifles raised.

“Alright! Let me say what’s going to happen here!” Sondra shouted. “If anyone makes any sudden movements, they lose their heads. If anyone moves to touch my boy, they lose their heads. If anyone so much as breathes, they lose their heads. So. Everyone in this room better start holding their goddamn breaths!”

Sondra then turned her rifle towards one of the Air Force officers who stood near the portal.

“Am I clear, Colonel Constantine?” Sondra demanded. The colonel simply nodded.

Kyle turned from the doorway and fled, as fast as he could, to Jimmy’s office. He then explained, as quickly as he could, the situation, and Jimmy rushed with him back to the portal room.

Somehow, Jimmy managed to convince the three women to

pull apart, and allow a view of the fourth person. It was a young boy. No older than Max, Kyle could tell. His skin was the same shade of light brown as Sondra's. However his eyes were the unmistakable greyish green of Ivan Roth's.

Kyle stepped forward, his hands in the air.

"Sondra," Kyle said calmly. "What is the boy's name? Shall I take him to the barracks? I believe he'd be safest there."

"My name is Jason! I can speak for myself," the boy said, in Spanish.

"No, Kyle. Jason stays with me. And if no one objects, I would like to take him home now. To my house," Sondra said.

"No chance of that," Jimmy interjected. "We have to screen all of you. Kyle is right. The boy is safest back in the barracks."

Still with his hands raised, Kyle stepped forward and took Jason's hand. Jason glanced at his mother, who just nodded, allowing Kyle to leave with Jason, heading back to the German single men's barracks. There, Kyle negotiated with the barrack commander to be able to be the door guard for the night, and have Jason with him. The barrack commander didn't object. The man who'd been the door guard for several nights was complaining of being "overworked," and it wasn't as if anyone else was volunteering.

Kyle and Jason sat in chairs by the front door for hours after this, chatting about this and that. Jason was not very talkative, but he told Kyle a few things. He had lived until that point in Honduras, he said, in a Zapatista jungle camp. The blonde who had arrived with him was named Belinda. The Middle Eastern woman was named Fatima.

Kyle was half shocked, half not at all surprised, when he saw Sondra stealing up the path towards the barracks, hours past lights out. She approached Kyle.

Sondra: “Hello Kyle. I’ve come for my son?”

Kyle: “Slow down. What ever possessed you to come back to this shithole?”

Sondra: “Well isn’t it obvious? They sent agents after me, Kyle. I figured if I didn’t come back, under my own terms, I’d be on the run forever.”

Kyle: “Most likely, yes. And so you should have been. For the sake of your beautiful boy. And here you are again, risking yourself to sneak around. How could you be so fucking selfish?”

Sondra: “Oh yeah? And just what do you know about my boy? Answer me!”

Kyle: “More than you do, apparently. Certainly more about keeping him alive. He may be eight years old. But here, only two months have passed. I don’t know what Jimmy has told you, but things are not favorable right now.”

Sondra bit her lip and looked down at the ground, then looked back up.

Sondra: “I suppose, that’s why I come to you now. I wish to say something, Kyle. You’re a son of a bitch. I cannot stand you. But I know you love your son.”

Kyle: “More than even my own freedom. Unlike you.”

Sondra: “Which makes me raise a point. I can’t always be around. And in a week or so, when Nicholas gets back, I’m sure there’ll be hell to pay. And my companions may end up any number of places, once they’re cleared. When I’m not around,

will you please watch Jason? Keep him alive for me?"

Kyle: "Of that, you need never ask. I just hope you someday realize what you have done."

Sondra then led Jason away, deftly avoiding the searchlights, as she'd no doubt learned to do since childhood, and Jason proceeded in tandem. He was clearly not entirely unprepared, which made Kyle's heart sink even more. What Kyle didn't know was that he'd soon have a fourth boy to look after.

Author's note. A very short chapter. However, it has introduced a very key figure. I trust the reader not to forget it.

Chapter 19

The morning after Sondra's dramatic return, Kyle went to the landing pad, awaiting his pickup for his mission with Emmermann, whatever it might be. He'd only been told to expect pickup. He left Max and Andrew at the apartment he knew was shared by the Foster-Mittelbraun family. At this time, they were the only people Kyle trusted who were also secure in their positions. He knew that Jack, who was at that time stationed in some far-flung corner of the base and thus unable to see his son but a few times a week, would approve his decision.

As usual, the ship which arrived was a large, shipping container-like craft which opened at the back end. Kyle was disappointed when Georg was not who emerged. He hadn't seen Georg since Mars, except via glass pas.

However, the person who did appear from the craft was the opposite of disappointing to him. A young, very pretty Japanese woman, in a form-fitting business suit with an eager smile, which Kyle found himself returning as she approached, already imagining the consummation of whatever relationship was to follow. Kyle was always Kyle, no matter the circumstance.

The woman extended her hand.

"I'm Miki Ito. I'm assistant to Mr. Arasaka. Are you Kyle Dellschau?"

Kyle took the extended hand and kissed it.

“I am he, Miki-san. At your service,” Kyle said.

Miki, of course, was likely quite used to this kind of behavior, and so did not rise to it. She merely turned, with a brisk nod, and stepped back onto the craft. Kyle followed, and seated himself. The craft closed, and began its journey.

Kyle: “So. Arasaka is wishing to see me? With Emmermann in tow?”

Miki: “Yes. I believe that your creator has a task for you, which Herr Emmermann in some way recommended you for. Oh, before I forget, you’ll need this.”

With that, Miki opened her jacket and withdrew a small, rectangular piece of green paper with a magnetic strip running along the top end. Kyle read the black print on one side. It turned out that this was a ticket for a passenger ship to the colony of New Munich. The ship was the Heisenberg, leaving from Mars’s orbit. Due to the close proximity, this meant that Emmermann’s ship “jumped” to its location almost instantly.

Kyle peered out of one of the slat windows when the jump ended, as usual. He could see the craft was flying along the underside of a huge sausage shaped craft, about two miles long and probably three quarters of a mile in diameter. The middle fifth of the bottom of the ship was a single large door, which hung open, leaving a light blue force field in the frame. Through the force field flew many small craft of various designs, entering and exiting the ship. In time, Emmermann’s ship also entered.

The ship emerged into a cavernous shuttle bay. One half of

the room, where shuttles landed, was gunmetal gray with a black floor. The other half was a series of lines leading to desks, where passengers were having their tickets checked and being waved further into the ship, while their shuttles flew out again, back to Mars or whatever nearby place they had boarded from.

Kyle and Miki deboarded from Emmermann's ship, which then closed up and flew through the force field. They pulled out their tickets and made their way to the desks, Miki asserting that she and Kyle were now "joined at the hip." Kyle wasn't sure why this must be- this hardly seemed a hostile environment. But he'd soon learn otherwise.

It happened after Kyle and Miki had gone through the line, were patted down at the beginning, then had their tickets scanned at the row of desks, all of which had large monitors on them resembling oversized glass pads. Kyle, who happened to be just in front of Miki, had his ticket scanned first, and, believing that the procedure was complete, began to step around the desk in order to enter the rest of the ship. Miki reached over and grabbed his arm. Forcefully.

"You didn't let them scan your mouth, Kyle." Miki said sharply, as if speaking to a disobedient child.

"My mouth? Why should they scan my mouth?" Kyle demanded.

"Well, you are a synthetic. There's rules about these things," Miki said.

By this point, the short, overweight woman manning the desk had stood, scanner in hand.

"Is this true Sir?" she asked.

“Yes. Is this relevant?” Kyle queried.

“Please open your mouth,” the woman instructed.

With a shrug, Kyle obeyed. The woman held up the scanner, ran it over Kyle’s serial number, then turned to Miki.

“Right. Miss, I need to see your voucher to bring that thing on board,” she said briskly, and without another word, Miki produced another piece of paper with a magnetic strip, this one pink, which the woman scanned.

“Good. Keep your synthetic either in your quarters or at least with you at all times. Don’t leave it to wander or leave it unattended. Failure to do this will result in you being fined and your synthetic being confiscated. Do you agree to these terms?” The woman with the scanner said.

“I agree,” Miki replied, and then gripped Kyle’s arm and began leading him into the Heisenberg proper.

It was incidents and days like this that made Kyle question his own civilization. To relay something he said to me recently; “What is any man but a collection of code?”

The ship, on the inside, was very impressive indeed, and set up like a fine cruise ship. The walls were white, and the carpet blue and gold. All through the parts of the ship that were passenger-accessible were restaurants, shops, gaming arcades, and so on. Kyle wished he could have enjoyed it, on the 18 hour trip that he and Miki had before them.

“Where the fuck do you get off pulling a stunt like that?” Kyle demanded of Miki the second they entered their cabin.

“Temper, temper,” Miki said. “They did say your model was quite animated. Almost human. Quite remarkable actually. I’ve

never seen one so indignant as you at being called by your own kind."

Kyle stepped closer to Miki.

"Watch yourself, Miss Ito. I suppose, programming wise, I can't harm you, seeing as how you represent my creator. But I do have friends, Miss Ito. More, I'd wager, than anyone of your character could ever hope to have. And I do talk to my friends."

Miki simply laughed.

"Oh Kyle. Yes, I'm sure you do talk. Plenty, in order to distract yourself from that empty, soulless feeling that keeps you up every night. Come come, let's get unpacked. Our clothes were pre-delivered."

The cabin was pleasant enough, all white with a single large screen on one wall which imitated a window, but could not have been, due to the position of the cabin within the ship. A panel on a wall opened to reveal a closet clothing for both Miki and Kyle. Apparently, according to a schedule Miki had printed out, it was to be dinner time in a couple of hours. First, she broached something to Kyle.

Miki: "I forgot to mention; I didn't bring any personal toys. They told me you're fully sexually functional. I hope you'll prove them correct."

Kyle: "Fuck you!"

Miki: "Yes. I'm ordering you to do just that. And you do have to obey my orders so far as you're capable."

And so, Kyle did prove just how "capable" he was. It felt incredibly violating at first, but eventually, Kyle managed to convince himself it was some kind of revenge, though deep

down, he still hated the experience. He was able to do one thing for revenge- ensure that they were late for dinner on Miki's precious schedule. Miki left the experience visibly shell-shocked by how real and manly Kyle had proved to be, and her "butter wouldn't melt" exterior cracked. Kyle now views it as one of his life's most humiliating experiences.

Dinner proved more pleasant than the preceding while had been. At least it was in public, and Miki did allow Kyle to eat. The restaurant she chose was an avant-garde Japanese steakhouse, with blood red carpet and walls and tables decorated with an eclectic mix of modern and traditional Japanese art. Adding to the mix was the fact that American tunes of the 1950s wafted through the speakers. It was an odd mix, but it somehow worked.

Kyle ordered the omakase sushi set. This was partly because it was the most expensive item on the menu, and he considered it payment for Miki's exploitation, and partly because he'd never tasted sushi. The sushi was served, it turned out, on a miniature boat of bamboo. The sushi was even more impressive than the presentation, and the saké improved the experience even further. Miki paid easily, if not altogether happily. Arasaka money was not to be strained by an extravagant dinner.

Their meals finished, Kyle and Miki returned to their cabin. The room was, thankfully, a double, so Kyle was not made to share a bed with Miki for the night. Kyle chose to stay awake the entire night. Somehow, he didn't trust Miki not to do something untoward. She didn't, it turned out.

Morning came, and the lights gradually came on as the

intercom played a soft German tune. Kyle and Miki rose, dressing and then packing the suitcases that had been sent for them. They only had one each, and they were small. They then went for breakfast in one of the ship's restaurants which in appearance mimicked a Parisian cafe, to limited success.

Not long after breakfast, an intercom announcement came, first in German, then Japanese, and then English; "All passengers deboarding at New Munich Spaceport Meerscheimer should gather their luggage and proceed to the landing bay. Those needing assistance should please see one of our porters, identifiable by red jackets. Deboarding will begin in 30 minutes. Thank you for flying Lyrae Interconstellation. Happy travels!"

Kyle and Miki then went and gathered their luggage. Kyle walked straight into the cabin, picked up his suitcase, then turned and rushed out before Miki could get any notions about asking him to also carry hers, only to immediately turn back. If he was caught without a ticket and therefore had his mouth scanned, he would be "confiscated" for being unaccompanied. He turned back to the cabin, and with a smug grin, Miki handed him her suitcase. The pair proceeded to the area from which they had first boarded, now of course devoid of shuttles.

Kyle never got a look at the planet from orbit on the approach. As the ship began to descend into the atmosphere, the massive door through which the shuttles had come through slid open, with an intercom announcement to stand clear. Kyle leaned forward, but all he could see was a large concrete landing pad.

The Heisenberg lowered, then hovered, with the bottom of

the ship perhaps 20 feet off the concrete. Another massive door opened in the ceiling, and from it came about a dozen glass tube elevators, hovering on anti-gravity plates. These lowered into the edges of the floor door, level with the floor itself. The elevators opened, and the ship's passengers boarded, although not many were deboarding on this planet it seemed, and so the elevators were far from filled before sealing up and lowering to the landing pad.

It was only upon reaching the landing pad and exiting that one could see that the pad was not on the ground at all. Quite the contrary, it was at least two miles off the ground, raised on monolithic stilts. It was not the only such landing pad either. Stretching out into the distance, in one direction, were more landing pads, connected to this one by paths. Kyle estimated that these pads were placed every half a mile. A monorail ran parallel to them, providing transit in-between. All of the landing pads culminated, ultimately, on the one Kyle and Miki had just stepped onto.

This pad also had a path leading from one side of it, which connected it to a building. A gigantic space elevator type building, circular and of mostly light blue glass on the outside, rising up higher than the eye could see. A red carpet covered this path, which the deboarded passengers, plus a few porters, started down on, making their way into the space elevator, which Miki said was known as the Meerscheimer Tower.

On their way into the tower, Kyle began examining the planet. The sun was of the blue classification, and just fully risen. It was obviously rather small and distant, as the

Goldilocks Zone of a blue giant is always quite remote. The planet was also clearly immense. Much bigger than Earth, given the size of the horizon and the sheer distance which one was able to see. The gravity was about 80% that of Earth. Two moons hung in the sky. Kyle rather wondered what the cardinal directions were, but with no knowledge of which way the planet spun, and therefore in which direction the sun rose and set in, it was not possible to tell.

The topography was quite impressive. Sharp, jagged mountains, vast forests, deep valleys, and large lakes and rivers were the principal elements in this region. Kyle noticed that the forests here were all pastel green. He didn't know it, but this is because a lighter colored sun requires less chlorophyll, and thus the lighter the sun on their native planet is, the less color the plants gradually have.

To the right of the landing pad, when facing the tower, was a gigantic city. New Munich, Kyle supposed. The city was large enough to hold a few tens of millions of people, and looked to be about 15 miles from the Meerscheimer Tower. Kyle felt a swell of pride at the city for two main reasons. The first was that, in spite of the city being far larger than any on Earth, there was not a single cloud of smog. German and Japanese engineering at their peaks. The other reason for Kyle's pride was that he realized, upon examination of the city, that the city, when seen from the air, was a gargantuan swastika.

The city itself was fascinating to see. The architecture was an intriguing mix of Bavarian, Japanese, and Mediterranean architecture, though of course, many of these traditional build-

ings were of much greater proportions than similar buildings on Earth. In the center were many skyscrapers, each several miles in height, connected by pathways. Indeed, much of the city seemed to be covered by elevated walking paths.

Kyle and Miki reached the side of the Meerscheimer Tower, where a few doors opened into the tower itself. Beyond these were a row of desks labeled “Customs” in several languages. At the desk which Kyle and Miki wound up at, Miki produced a colony ID, as well as Kyle’s synthetic voucher. Apparently Kyle, as an object, did not require an ID, however he was forced to once again undergo the humiliation of having his mouth scanned.

Beyond the desks, surrounding the hollow center of the building, was a revolving floor, like a great record player. At occasional intervals here and there were places from which one could step off of the revolving walkway. Some of these were for elevator bays, while others opened onto other landing pads outside the Meershceimer Tower. It was to one of these that Kyle and Miki went, finding it covered in shuttles.

A young, petite, eager Japanese man stood on the landing pad, holding a sign beckoning Kyle and Miki. They approached, and the young man bowed to both Miki and Kyle in turn, then introduced himself as Masahiro, and proudly proclaimed himself as Shinji Sr’s finest shuttle pilot.

“Pleased to meet you Masahiro. Your treatment is refreshing,” Kyle said, with a venomous look in Miki’s direction.

“Thank you, Herr Dellschau,” Masahiro said, visibly confused. “Will you both please come with me?”

Masahiro then led Kyle and Miki along through the many shuttles to one particularly remarkable one. This shuttle resembled a massive black fly, about 25 feet long, standing on its legs. Its body stood at about 12 feet in height. Its two huge eyes served as windows. Masahiro, from one of the pockets of his flight suit, took out a small remote control and clicked a button, then showed Kyle and Miki to the back of the craft, where a ramp had dropped, allowing entry to the craft itself. The inside was black and held eight bucket seats of white leather, not including the pilot's seat, which occupied one of the "eyes." Kyle being Kyle, he made a dive for the passenger's seat in the other "eye," securing himself the best view. Miki sat in the back, aloof as ever, and Masahiro of course took the pilot's seat.

Kyle: "Do you mind taking the scenic route to wherever the fuck it is we're going?"

"Yes. That was what I already planned, Herr Dellschau," Masahiro said with a slight bow, which Kyle reciprocated with a smile.

The wings of the craft spread wide, becoming more like the wings of a dragonfly than of the more typical fly which the body of the craft resembled. The wings began to vibrate, lifting the craft, which began to fly in the direction of New Munich. Kyle studied the cityscape with rapt attention. Masahiro, seeing this, flew low, giving Kyle exquisite views. Kyle's pride swelled even more at the city. This was a truly Germanic and Japanese space. Kyle felt an almost anthropological desire to walk among this city, to know its people, and to study it.

The craft eventually flew over the city entirely, and back into the countryside, aiming towards one particular mountain. This one was a good deal larger than the others, and on top was what appeared to be an old Japanese town. The craft flew too low to get a good look, however, and instead circled the large mountain. On the other side of the mountain, a large chunk had been carved into the mountain- a garage of sorts, in which at least five other of the fly-like craft were parked. It was to here that Masahiro flew, parking along side the other crafts, and Kyle and Miki alighted.

Miki: “Right. I have to go make arrangements with the men. Masahiro, will you please show Herr Dellschau around?”

And without waiting for an answer, Miki strode off to one of the elevators which stood at the end of the garage, this one labeled as “house,” in a sign above it. Kyle was not sad to be left without her. He turned to Masahiro.

“Right. Where to?” Kyle asked cordially. He was forcing himself to improve his own mood.

Masahiro once again bowed, and then took off towards one of the sides of the garage. Kyle followed, and he and Masahiro reached a door in the side of the garage, which they then entered. They found themselves in a rather small room. While the first few feet were stone, the rest was covered in tatami mats. Masahiro took off his shoes, and Kyle, sensing propriety, followed.

Along one wall was a single bench, on which were two carefully folded piles of clothes. Kyle and Masahiro approached this bench. Kyle was slightly surprised to see Masahiro to promptly

strip naked and begin putting on the clothes stacked. With a chuckle, Kyle followed suit. The clothes turned out to be traditional Japanese bathing wear. Long white underwear, a white linen robe, and a light brown yukata, which Kyle required Masahiro's assistance in tying properly. Kyle realized that these clothes must have been sent for him ahead of time, as they fit perfectly, as Kyle guessed that Japanese robes in his size were not exactly common, much less Japanese slippers, which were also included in the outfits given to them.

When dressed, Masahiro led Kyle from the little dressing room to the bank of elevators which Miki had used, then stopped and called one of the elevators. Each of the elevators had a white sign with black hiragana lettering printed on it, indicating where each elevator would deliver its user. Masahiro paused in front of the one labeled "baths" and pressed the call button. The elevator was already waiting, and Kyle and Masahiro boarded.

The elevator ascended, climbing further into the upper part of the mountain, eventually delivering Kyle and Masahiro in what appeared to be a large, all wooden hallway, save for the stone floor. On each side of the hallway was a large doorway, each covered by a curtain, a red one bearing the "woman" kanji, and a blue one, which Kyle and Masahiro entered.

They entered into a traditional Japanese bath. It was Kyle's first experience in such a place, though he'd seen a few while in Okinawa, and it was the most relaxing experience he'd had in quite some time, though Masahiro hurried Kyle along more than Kyle would have liked. At the end, Masahiro and Kyle re-

dressed, then reentered the hallway from which they had come into the baths, going to a second elevator at the end of the hallway, opposite the one they had come from. This elevator ascended further, and just outside of it was a short stone staircase, at last leading above ground.

Had Kyle not known better, he'd have sworn he entered the past, perhaps through some portal he had not seen. They had emerged at the end of a traditional Japanese bridge over a narrow moat. The moat surrounded a large wooden Japanese castle, encircled by other traditional buildings and real trees clearly brought from Japan on Earth. This was the small Japanese town that Kyle had peeked on the approach to the mountain. One glance behind him, in the direction of New Munich, still visible on the horizon, revealed that Kyle hadn't been transported back in time.

With Masahiro leading the way, he and Kyle walked over the bridge and into the "town" through the large Japanese gate which stood at the end. The people in the "town" were all dressed in clothes straight from feudal Japan. There weren't many to be seen, and those that were seemed to be castle staff of various ranks, mostly women, including one very pretty Geisha, who gave Kyle a flirtatious wave as Masahiro led Kyle into one of the buildings near the entrance.

This building was small, with a tatami mat floor. A few cushions sat on the floor, as did a large bowl of candies. Dominating one wall was a large painting of the trunk and one large branch of a cherry blossom tree. A number of the branch's twigs were made up of kanji names followed by birthdays, and the branch

and trunk themselves also had names on them. The Arasaka family tree.

Masahiro then left Kyle in the little building, with the promise that soon, Kyle would be gathered for his meeting. With a shrug, Kyle decided to explore the room. He examined the family tree first. The trunk bore the name “Takeshi Arasaka,” and the branch, the names of Shinji Arasaka and Toshiko Takeyama, with the twigs representing their children. The reader may refer to earlier in the volume for a list.

Kyle next sat on one of the large, green, onion shaped cushions surrounding the candy bowl. A small green leather book sat beside the bowl, and Kyle picked it up. It was a basic, but adequate multilingual guide to Japanese etiquette, particularly that related to business meetings. While Kyle knew the basics from Okinawa, he flipped through the book anyway.

The book finished, Kyle pulled one of the candies from the bowl. They were of the rolled, hard variety, built up layer by layer by hand, rolled, and then cut when hard. Each candy was about an inch in width, red on the outside and white on the inside. In the middle was a katakana word- “robotto.” Robot. Kyle ate the candy. It was raspberry flavored. Kyle’s favorite flavor, so he picked up a large handful and began eating them, then stood and began examining the other paintings on the walls, which were quite striking in their own right.

It was as Kyle was examining these paintings, nibbling on his handful of candies, when one of the little building’s rice paper doors slid open, and Kyle turned to see a young woman entering. She was slight and Japanese, and quite beautiful. She wore

a silk kimono of bright pink, with a single large white dragon on it, broken only by a dark red obi. In spite of her traditional dress, her hairstyle and makeup were unmistakably of the 1980s, and just peeking out from the bottom of her kimono was a pair of jeans. Something told Kyle she wasn't an Arasaka employee come to fetch him.

"Expensive handful of candy you have there," the girl said in flawless German, slowly gliding to the candy bowl and languidly taking a piece for herself.

"Akane-san or Miwako-san, I presume?" Kyle said, making a calculated guess, based on the girl's apparent age.

"Akane. Been studying our family tree, I see. Herr?" Akane said.

"Dellschau. How did you know I was German?" Kyle asked curiously.

Akane laughed.

"I'm rather good at these things. And also Herr Emmermann is visiting. And I saw Miki scurrying about, in her usual harried, overbearing way. Usually means that one of your kind is also present," Akane said.

"Emmermann. You know him rather well?" Kyle asked.

"No. Does anyone?" Akane said sarcastically.

"No, I suppose not," Kyle said, smiling. "In any event, I don't imagine you've come to fetch me?"

"No," Akane replied. "I saw Miki marching about, in her usual unpleasant way, which means my father has a business guest waiting. I wondered if perhaps you might be pleasant."

"And am I pleasant?" Kyle asked.

Akane shrugged.

"That depends on what you say next, Herr Dellschau. Are you invited to the dinner tonight? Do you plan to enjoy yourself?"

"I don't know if I'm invited," Kyle said truthfully.

"I see," Akane said. "Well. You are now. I insist."

"I'd be delighted," Kyle said, surprised.

"Good. I'll pass it on to one of the staff on my way out, and they'll pass it up the chain of command. I am on my way into town for an ice cream sundae. Heaven knows there won't be any tonight. It's all traditional fare at these things," Akane said with a roll of her eyes.

"What's the occasion?" Kyle asked.

"Oh, my sister Sakura is on planet. The one time in a year most of us get to see her. My father always throws some big feast for her to 'remind her of her roots,' Akane said with another eye roll. "Now. I bid you farewell, Herr Dellschau. I will see you this evening."

And with that, Akane turned and strode away, in the direction of the exit from the Arasaka compound. Kyle supposed that by "into town" Akane had meant New Munich, rather than into the mock "town" of the compound itself.

Not five minutes later, another young woman came striding up to the door and knocked, in spite of it still standing open. This woman wore a yellow kimono with a pattern of flowers of various colors.

"Shinji-sama… see you now," she said in unconfident English, with a bow.

“Thank you. I will gladly see him,” Kyle said in Japanese with a bow, earning a shy smile from the woman who turned to lead him to the meeting.

They walked about 200 yards into the mock “town,” towards a long, white, single story building with a red shingled roof. A samurai clan meeting hall, or an imitation of one. The young woman slid open one door at the end of the building, and gestured for Kyle to enter, telling him to also take off his slippers, as these mats were especially sensitive. Kyle did so, and entered the building.

Inside, Kyle at last saw Emmermann and Shinji Sr. They were both at the far end of the building, with Shinji seated on the floor before a low-lying Japanese tea table. Emmermann was standing and pacing, in flagrant violation of etiquette, and Kyle got the sense that the conversation was not exactly going well. Both men wore kimonos. Emmermann’s was a solid dark green piece, while Shinji Sr. wore a navy blue kimono with a tasteful motif of silver chrysanthemums. The Imperial symbol. Shinji Sr. stood at Kyle’s entrance, and gave a slight bow, which Kyle reciprocated, with a much deeper bow.

Shinji Sr: “Kyle Dellschau! We meet at last! It seems strange we never have until now.”

Kyle: “Does it? Yes, I suppose it does. I appreciate your hospitality, Shinji-sama.”

Shinji Sr: “Your manners are too much, Kyle-san. Please sit. Have some tea. Your benefactor and I have been discussing business.”

And so Kyle walked over to the little tea table, and sat oppo-

site Shinji Sr. Emmermann still stood, however he stopped pacing. Shinji Sr. snapped his fingers, and a small panel in the wall to his right slid open. A geisha stepped through, of course, with a bow.

"Another cup for our guest, please," Shinji Sr. requested.

"Of course, Shinji-sama," the geisha said, and hardly 30 seconds later returned with the cup, bending over to pour Kyle's tea from the pot, and do the usual tea ceremony.

When she was bent over, her face less than a foot from his face, Kyle noticed something, namely that the geisha was a synthetic. Her makeup was too perfectly applied, without a single tiny missed spot. Kyle suspected it was not even makeup at all, as it did not carry the faint scent which makeup usually does. Also her movements were slightly too perfect and precise, and her eyes darted to and fro faster than human eyes could have.

The tea ceremony completed, the geisha turned and left, and Kyle picked up his teacup and sipped. The tea was green, and had a strong herbal flavor.

Kyle: "I greatly appreciate your hospitality and tradition, Shinji-sama. But I suppose this is not merely a social visit?"

Shinji Sr: "No, I suppose not. Sigmund-san has told me you have a talent for looking after and raising young boys."

Kyle: "Well. I have only been doing so on a single subject, and only for a bit over a Terran year. But I am quite pleased with the result, I dare say."

Shinji Sr: "I see. Well, I suppose I will state my point. I have a…. a…. I shall not call him a son. I have an embarrassing offshoot whom I should like to see rid of. But in ridding him, I

would feel better knowing that he is being forged into a man by another man. A man of the military like yourself, forging him in the fires of a place like Camp Hero."

Kyle: "Then I'm afraid my skills have been misunderstood. I've kept my boy alive, nurtured, and as happy as possible. I don't torture or 'forge' him, nor any of the other children I occasionally guard."

One of Shinji Sr's thick black eyebrows shot up at this, surprised by Kyle's soft objection, though it's doubtless he also knew that Kyle couldn't actually refuse.

Kyle: "You also make it sound as though the boy has committed some crime. What has he done?"

Emmermann: "The boy is a faggot, Kyle."

It was the first time Emmermann had said a word since Kyle's arrival. He sounded tired. Drained. It was the first time Kyle had heard Emmermann sound this way. Kyle would always wonder what argument had been going down before his arrival.

Kyle: "I see. How old is he? What is the boy's name?"

Shinji Sr: "Harune. I suppose that on Earth he would be nine years of age. Our years are shorter here, making him 14."

Kyle: "At nine years of age, the boy is already sucking dick? You must forgive me, Shinji-sama, but that sounds more of an environmental issue than a psychosexual one. In my experience, at any rate."

Shinji Sr. set his teacup down decisively, and following etiquette, so did Kyle. Shinji Sr. leaned forward then, making full eye contact with Kyle.

Shinji Sr: "I suppose you don't much like me Kyle. That is no

issue. Few do. I'm not in a position to be liked. Nor is it in my nature. But in your case, Kyle, I'd like to know the reason. Is it my decadence perhaps? My rejection of my son? Or do you not like my-"

Kyle: "I do not like your face, Shinji-sama."

"Careful," Emmermann said to Kyle, telepathically. However, he did not say to stop.

Shinji Sr: "My face? My women have left me with the impression that I was very handsome!"

Kyle: "Perhaps so. I dislike your face because it is not an honest one. You present yourself as a daimyo. A symbol of the old world. Yet your geishas are synthetic. And you refuse to raise your offspring."

A slow, wicked smile spread across Shinji Sr's face.

Shinji Sr: "You will do, I believe, Kyle-san. You will leave tomorrow. I believe my daughter has arranged for you to stay for dinner. But perhaps you would prefer to go into the city for your dinner?"

Kyle: "If it's all the same to you, Shinji-sama, I would rather eat here, and spend the next intervening hours getting to know Harune a bit."

Shinji Sr: "Very well. Will you be wishing for female company?"

Kyle paused. It wasn't that he didn't want to be satisfied, although Miki's actions the previous evening had temporarily lessened his general desires. Rather, he was put off more and more by these men like Emmermann and Shinji Sr. who pimped out and gave away sex in the way one gives a glass of whiskey.

Still, Kyle shrugged, deciding he shouldn't turn down hospitality.

Kyle: "I suppose I'm always wishing for female company."

Shinji Sr: "Very good! I have, in some ways, improved on the precedents set by the ancestors. You see, my geisha are also courtesans. I have them on hand to improve the morale of myself, my sons, and my male guests. They are synthetic, like yourself. So they are programmed to… produce the highest desired outcome."

Emmermann: "You should take the offer, Kyle, you won't regret it."

Kyle: "I didn't imagine I would. I must say, Shinji-sama, you are extremely invested in the sex lives of the men around you. Well, I suppose I should be off to my room?"

Shinji Sr's eyes narrowed, but he merely snapped his fingers once again, and once again, the geisha entered with a bow.

Shinji Sr: "Please, show our guest to his room. He will also be requiring company, after dinner. He's to have whichever of you he wants. He's an honored guest, as he's ridding us of a problem."

Geisha: "Of course, Shinji-sama."

The geisha extended her perfect hand to Kyle, and Kyle took it, standing and allowing the geisha to lead him from the room. Shinji Sr. also stood, though he remained in the meeting hall, along with Emmermann, likely to resume their earlier argument, whatever it may have been.

The geisha led Kyle along several paths, winding deeper into the "town," and up to the castle. The castle rose to at least eight

stories. A marvel of engineering, for such a structure to be built out of wood.

The inside was as one would expect. Simple, elegant, traditional, and spotless. At this time of day, it seemed most staff were occupied, as not many were seen around the castle as the geisha guided Kyle up to the fifth floor. There was no elevator here. It seemed that Shinji Sr. wanted his household in top physical condition. Eventually, they reached a room which had a small rectangular sign hung on the door, which bore Kyle's name in katakana. The room was quite large and had a balcony, though no bathroom. The toilets were all on the first floor, and the baths were the ones Kyle had earlier used.

Kyle entered the room and began examining it. It was quite simple, as traditional Japanese rooms usually are. Just a room and a closet, the latter of which held Kyle's bedding and a few changes of clothing. A little table sat on the floor, and a few books on a small shelf. The geisha entered after Kyle and, without prompting, began to remove her kimono.

"No, not now," Kyle said hastily. "I was hoping to talk to Harune. But after dinner? We have a date."

"Of course, Kyle-san. I will fetch him. Have you any other requests?" the geisha asked, retying her sash.

"Yes, actually," Kyle said. "What am I to wear to dinner?"

The geisha smiled.

"Aha," she said, "I have not met many Germans who care about such things. Not for Japanese fashion, anyway."

"I'm not a typical German," Kyle replied with a smile.

The geisha opened Kyle's closet, and with a look through his

clothes, helped Kyle decide what to wear. In the end, they decided on a stately kimono of solid black, with a white belt and a red haori jacket. This decided, the geisha turned to leave.

"One more thing," Kyle said. "What is your name?"

"Oh. Keiko, Kyle-san. They don't normally care about that either. Now, I will fetch Harune for you," Keiko said, then bowed, turned, and left, closing the door behind her.

Kyle also turned then, picking up one of the books. Which book it was, he has since forgotten, except that it was some piece of Classical Japanese literature, which he only half read until he heard a knock at the door. It slid open, revealing both Keiko and a young boy. The geisha gave the young boy a gentle push to step into the room, which he did, with a timidity that Kyle knew comes only from a lifetime of abuse.

The boy himself was ethereal in appearance. His hair was thick, black, and smooth, and his skin lightly bronzed. His large black eyes complemented his hair, and his oval, symmetrical face was very unmistakably Japanese. The boy wore a midnight blue yukata with a simple yet appealing woven image of a single white crane covering a large portion of it.

"Hello, Harune," Kyle said, bowing. "I believe we're going to get to know each other very well. Keiko, could we possibly have some tea?"

With an assurance, Keiko bowed and left, leaving Kyle and Harune alone.

"Are you Ky.... Kairu?" Harune asked timidly, struggling with Kyle's name.

Kyle smiled and knelt, though Harune was rather tall for his

age, likely due to having grown on a lighter gravity planet.

“Yes, I am. And I know you’re Harune,” Kyle said. “It looks like you’re going to be living with me for a time.”

“Yes. My father says I’m a ‘fucking faggot,’ and I’m not his son anymore,” Harune said matter-of-factly. “I’m not even sure what that means. My English isn’t very good, I’m afraid.”

Harune’s calmness at these words was both amusing and alarming to Kyle. He decided to take it calmly, and answer Harune’s implicit question.

“Well. That would mean you’re a degenerate. But I believe you’re a bit young for that, no? Let’s talk for a while, Harune,” Kyle said. In spite of his deep compassion, Kyle still held his Nazi beliefs.

Kyle and Harune talked for hours, as it happened. Harune was a rather good conversationalist, once Kyle managed to break the ice, which he did by opening up first. Kyle told Harune about Camp Hero, about Max, and about his own interests. Harune responded eventually, telling Kyle of his favorite books, his favorite anime, and so on. Kyle also learned that the allegations of homosexuality came from an oracle used by Shinji, not from any actions by Harune. As a militant atheist, Kyle could do nothing but laugh at this.

As time and conversation carried on, Kyle, inspired by Harune’s shy nature and the blue kimono Harune wore, thought of a nickname for Harune; “Little Boy Blue.” To this day, this is how Kyle refers to Harune in conversation.

Eventually, evening came, and Kyle and Harune heard a gong echoing through the castle, which Harune said was the dressing

gong, to be followed 15 minutes later. For over an hour, they had heard the sounds of guests arriving to the compound. And so, hastily, with a bit of Harune's assistance, Kyle re-dressed into the formal ensemble chosen by Keiko. Under Harune's direction, the pair filed downstairs and out of the castle.

Kyle and Harune walked to another long, single story building, which Harune explained was the banquet hall. This turned out to be a single large, red-carpeted room with ornate red walls. The dining party was seated at the usual little tables around the floor, with Shinji Sr. at the head. A veritable army of geisha whisked to and fro, serving up various dishes. At Shinji Sr's left sat Sakura, and at his right, an older woman whom Kyle guessed must be Toshiko, Shinji Sr's wife.

Kyle, as a guest, was seated near the front of the table. He found himself sitting next to Shinji Sr's wife, and directly across from Emmermann. Harune sat at Kyle's left, as Kyle's dinner companion. To their left, as it happened, was Yoshi Arasaka. Finally a friendly face, though Toshiko was also friendly seeming.

Over the evening of the 20-course kaiseki dinner, both Yoshi and Toshiko filled Kyle in on some of the other guests. The young German gentleman seated next to Akane was her boyfriend, Heinz Reinmuller. The older, boisterous Japanese gentleman who drank too much was Aoki Takeyama, Toshiko's younger brother. Also present were several more Arasaka children. The girl a little younger than Harune was Chiyo. The quiet girl who was constantly trying to calm her uncle Aoki's drinking was Miwako, Akane's non-identical twin. The young Arasaka

man slightly older than the twins was Shinji Jr., who was constantly making eye contact with his father, no doubt sending telepathic messages. Not present was Himiko, who was then two years old, though plenty mentioned her. Miki also put in an appearance, but was thankfully seated far from Kyle. As it turned out, Kyle, Emmermann, and Heinz Reinmuller were the only non-Japanese present.

Throughout the evening, Harune was shunned. The only ones who acknowledged his existence at all were Kyle, Yoshi, and the geisha who brought Harune his food. As always at these things, Kyle grew bored and rather dissociated from the evening, in spite of one geisha who insisted on flirting with him. This one continuing for 20 courses meant that it took even longer than usual, and while the portions were very small, Shinji Sr. ate very slowly, and no guest received the next available course until Shinji Sr. was finished. The food, as one would expect, was delicious, but for Kyle it did not salvage his boredom.

Eventually, at last, the dinner finished, and the excitement began dying down. Someone called for a song to close out the evening, and seemingly out of nowhere, several instruments were gathered. Next came a debate as to the song. Eventually, one of Yoshi's songs, written several years ago, won out. It was apparently a family favorite. And so, one of the synthetic geisha took a microphone, also fished from somewhere, and sang.

Kataritsugu

Hito no maku
Fukisusabu kaze no naka e
Magire chirabaru hoshi no na wa
Wasure rarete mo

Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai
Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai

Ashiato wa
Furu ame to
Furu toki no naka e kiete
Tataeru uta wa Eiyuu no
Tame ni sugite mo

Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai
Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai

Yukusaki o terasu no wa
Mada sakanu mihatenuyume
Haruka ushiro o terasu no wa
Adokenai yume

Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai

Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai

Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai
Headlight, taillight
Tabi wa mada owaranai

The song was executed perfectly- almost too perfectly, due to the performers being synthetics designed especially for entertainment.

The evening concluded, and Kyle split from Harune, with each going to their own room, to reunite in the morning. As promised, female company did show up in Kyle's room. Shinji Sr. did not exaggerate about the "effectiveness" of his synthetics.

As morning came, Kyle slipped on a clean yukata, and then went to the baths. He had awoken practically with the blue sun. While Kyle did see a number of staff beginning their day, he was the only guest or castle resident to arise at this hour, which was just how Kyle liked it. Kyle made his way back to the baths, and was elated to find them already open. He was determined to bathe once without being hurried along. While a few of the male staff of the castle did show up to bathe, no one bothered Kyle. He emerged refreshed, ready to tackle the day and escort Harune back to Camp Hero.

Kyle found Harune waiting in his room, apparently having been sent. Harune wore western clothing that day, save for his

slippers, though he was carrying a pair of sneakers under one arm.

"Are we ready to leave, Sir?" Harune asked militarily.

"You've no need to call me that, Harune," Kyle said, pained at hearing it. "Call me Kyle, please. And I don't know if we're ready to leave. I suppose I need to see your father, and my benefactor."

"He's who sent me," Harune explained. "Your benefactor's ship is waiting for us in the bay. As are your clothes. Kyle."

Harune said Kyle's name this time with a shy smile, which Kyle returned with a much larger one, and man and boy left, finding, as promised, one of Emmermann's usual shipping container-like craft awaiting them. Kyle stopped to dress up in the clothing that he had worn to the planet initially. Then, Kyle and Harune boarded Emmermann's craft, which "jumped" to Camp Hero.

Kyle and Harune emerged onto the same landing pad from which Kyle had first arrived at Camp Hero, over two years previously. Harune took one look around, his eyes as wide as a pair of large black moons. Harune then reached up for Kyle's hand, and Kyle took it, allowing Harune to hold on as he went off to find Max and determine what day and time they had returned to. December the 20th, it turned out, according to one passerby, and workers had just been let out for the day. And so Kyle made his way to the Foster home.

Kyle knocked on the door, and was let in by McKayla Foster. Her parents were out, she said, and Jack had come back and had taken Andrew off-base altogether on Emmermann orders of

some kind. Max sat in the apartment's large living room, nibbling a cream cheese bagel and reading a comic book.

"Hello Dad. Who is he?" Max asked, gesturing at Harune, who was hiding behind Kyle, clinging determinedly to Kyle's flight jacket.

Kyle stepped aside.

"Well Max, this is Harune. Your new brother," Kyle said.

For all Harune's painful shyness, he carried himself well, offering Max a bow and a "Konnichiwa," followed by a "pleased to meet you," in broken English.

"Hello," Max said, then with a shrug reached for the comic he had been reading.

"Would you like to look?" Max asked cheerfully.

Harune smiled widely for the first time that Kyle had seen. The boys clicked instantly, as Kyle had known they would, even though they were so incredibly different. As Kyle looked at them, momentarily lost in their world, as young boys so often are, Kyle felt perhaps the happiest he ever had. Still, one thought nagged at the back of his consciousness; what future was there for them in Camp Hero?

As it turned out, he wouldn't have to wait long for an answer.

Author's note. Possibly the most personal chapter I have written, and certainly one whose content I struggled to reconcile with being publicly available. I hope the reader appreciates both the content and the emotion behind it.

Chapter 20

A shocking thing came across Kyle's computer on the afternoon of December 24th, 1986; a mission assignment. Other than his Emmermann errand in which he had picked up Harune, it had been weeks since he had been on an actual mission. The computer said that all of Kyle's necessary information was contained on his glass pad, which he switched on.

The mission, it turned out, was to be a solo operation, at a monastery in 14th century Tibet. It was expected to last for several years, but of course only a few minutes, from a Camp Hero perspective, would have passed in between Kyle's leaving and his return. Kyle stood, and went to check on Max and Harune, in the closet where he'd hidden them. Harune's registration had proven a good deal easier than Max's, as the review boards like the one Max had been scored in front of were on hold. In addition, the staffing shortages meant that any unoccupied bunk was essentially open territory, so it had been unnecessary to register Harune for accommodation, thus he'd simply been put up in Kyle's barracks without question.

All settled, Kyle went to Angelique's station, for the attire required for his operation. This turned out to be the type of clothing worn by a man of the Tungusic Steppe in the 14th century, and it was not entirely implausible for Kyle to be one of these, as the Tungusic Steppe does indeed have light haired and

light eyed people.

Once dressed, Kyle made his way to the portal room. He was to be given no weapons. On his way, Kyle ran into a girl. Sara Polanski, Kyle realized. One of the girls whom he'd escorted on his first mission for Project Phoenix, now two years older, of course.

Kyle: "Sara? Is that really you? Gods, you've survived this long?"

Sara: "Kyle, isn't it? Yes. My transfer is supposed to be next week, but who knows if that'll go through. For now I'm a messenger girl."

Kyle: "Do you know my son? Max Bronsley? Have you seen him in your training?"

Sara: "Yes. All the girls know him."

Kyle smiled at this. Nine years old, and Max was already taking after his father.

Kyle: "How is the treatment in the training areas, since these martial law changes?"

Sara: "If you'll excuse me Kyle, I have some letters to pick up."

And with that, Sara ran down the hallway. Kyle supposed she would be in trouble if she was caught answering him. This filled him with more concern over Max's safety and treatment. While Kyle had looked over Max regularly for signs of floggings, and asked Max frequent questions as well as monitoring Max's mental state, he was still prone to nervousness, particularly in the martial law-like environment that had set in since Sondra's escape.

Kyle reached the portal room, and found Mark Muehlbauer seated in the chair, already having opened the portal. Beyond the “tunnel,” Kyle could just make out a snowy environment. Kyle hated snow. But, with a shrug, he stepped through the portal.

Kyle found himself in a snow-covered valley, in what he assumed to be the Tibetan Himalayas. At the top of one of the mountains was a large Buddhist monastery. Kyle knew this was his target, as laid out in his mission brief. With a shudder, both at the cold and at the distance he would have to travel, Kyle set out on the trek, grateful that it was early morning, and he would have the sun directly at his back within a few hours.

Kyle reached the monastery about seven hours later. The climb was difficult and miserable, and Kyle wondered how it was possible that the materials for the monastery he was approaching had been hauled up the mountain.

Upon reaching the top of the mountain, Kyle decided to adopt a stumbling, confused stance. Kyle thought he’d be most likely to get in if he seemed sympathetic, especially after seeing a few monks from a distance and realizing they were warrior monks, judging by their muscles and the spears they wore across their backs.

Shouting in an archaic Tungusic tongue, and stumbling, Kyle approached. One of the monks, gathering snow into a bucket, looked up, then began shouting. Almost immediately, a bell rang somewhere, and the massive red doors to the monastery complex swung open. A crowd of monks with spears in hand rushed out. Kyle knew he could beat them all, with his enhance-

ments, however he feigned fear, throwing up his hands and begging in the chosen Tungusic tongue.

“What is he saying?” one monk asked, in Tibetan.

“What even is he?” demanded another.

“Look at his light hair and light eyes. He is a devil!” a monk, no older than 15 by Kyle’s estimation, screamed.

“Hold! All hold!” a deep, resonant, older voice shouted, somehow cutting through the crowd.

Kyle looked up at this voice, to see it belonged to another monk. Older, taller, and with a longer beard than the others. The abbot, Kyle surmised.

The abbot approached Kyle, his spear lowered, unlike the other monks. He was apparently also a guru, as the following exchange was telepathic, something the other monks could not have accomplished.

Abbot: “Why are you here, traveler? Think your answer. Your tongue is not understood here.”

Kyle: “I’m from somewhere far from here. A place where men look like me. I am lost. I need shelter.”

A slow, sad smile spread over the abbott’s face.

Abbot: “No. That isn’t the truth. I know what you are. You come from a place far from here. A time long ahead of us on the Bhavachakra. And you have come to steal our treasure.”

Kyle paused. He did not, under any circumstances, wish to kill these monks. In spite of Kyle’s disdain for religion, these monks represented, in Kyle’s mind, the highest value a man could have; simplicity. Kyle drew to his full height.

Kyle: “Yes. I have no quarrel with you. It is what you possess

that I need."

The abbot laughed. A full, hearty, deep voiced laugh. Kyle's heart sank further.

Abbot: "I cannot allow that. You know that. But there is much good in you, traveler. You must stay. For a period, anyway. Join us. Learn our arts and our ways. Perhaps you might change and come to realize that your place is not as others have told you."

Kyle: "I accept your wager, Guru. But I have two sons. At some point, I will have to leave and return to them"

Abbot: "The doors lie open. This is a monastery, not a dungeon."

Kyle, of course, was bluffing and using his psychic shielding. Kyle knew that his mission must win out, and he must return with the alien artifacts that the mission brief had said were housed within the monastery. But Kyle was determined to do this without bloodshed. These people were too precious as relics in their own right.

As it turned out, Kyle stayed at the monastery for nearly two years, when going by the moon. There were no calendars in the monastery. As none of the monks could pronounce Kyle's name, he was given a Tibetan name; "Grul bzhud pa." Traveler.

Kyle, with his abilities, fared quite well at the monastery. Some of the monks considered him a guru, however the abbot put a stop to such notions, making it clear that Kyle was a man of a different world. Nothing more, nothing less.

Kyle did struggle for a time with the lack of women. However, he adapted, and became quite proficient in "handling

himself," as the other monks were.

The reason Kyle stayed at the monastery so long was that, in addition to there being no rush, Kyle had difficulty finding the artifacts. The monks kept them very secret. However, Kyle fulfilled his purpose as an infiltration unit, ingratiating himself very well until, at last, he was shown a secret room within the central temple which housed the artifacts.

According to the abbot, the artifacts had come from "a small silver dragon" which had "fallen from heaven" near the monastery. A ship, obviously. The artifacts themselves consisted of a red-painted pyramid, about two feet in height, as well as a few scrolls. The abbot turned to Kyle after showing him the artifacts.

Abbot: "And now, Traveler, the time has come. I pass these into your capable hands."

Kyle: "Guru? What do you mean by this? You are giving me these artifacts, when you've guarded them so long?"

Abbot: "You still have so much to learn. These artifacts were never destined to stay here. And nor were you. And nor is this place destined to stay. There is nothing permanent. We are all travelers on the wheel of life and death."

Kyle: "But why now? Why not at the beginning? Why show me so much kindness? I am a killer, Guru."

Abbot: "Yes. You have killed. And you will kill again, many times. But you have a good soul, Traveler. And were I not to hand these over, you would be forced to steal them. I hand them over to preserve peace. And with the assurance that whatever hell you must necessarily return them to shall never last. And

nor shall you. Nor your sons. But if it brings some momentary peace for you to have these artifacts, I hand them over without question."

Kyle: "I…… suppose I see. Guru, I wish I did not have to leave this place. I wish I could gather my sons and return them to your world of peace. But perhaps that is yet another lesson I must learn. Goodbye, Guru. I wish you luck, in your travels along the Wheel."

Abbot: "And I wish the same to you…… Kyle."

The abbot had pronounced Kyle's given name correctly. He must have practiced it, just for this one tiny moment on "The Wheel." It was enough to make Kyle weep.

Kyle stepped forward to the artifacts and took them in his arms. He then turned to the abbot and, after a final, deep bow, left the monastery, his arms full of the artifacts he had come for. Kyle still somehow felt guilt at having them. However, he'd accomplished his goal; not a single of these men of peace had met their end due to Project Phoenix's ambitions. It was as Kyle reached the outside that he began to think of the struggle of getting the artifacts back down the mountain.

Kyle also realized that there was no extraction plan, and so he sent a telepathic ping to Jimmy; "I have accomplished my mission. I'm ready to come back."

There was an alarming pause before Kyle received a response.

"Kyle. Yes, you should be back. Proceed to the bottom of the mountain," was what Jimmy's telepathic "voice" said.

"When you can?" Kyle thought. Then he shrugged, suppos-

ing there must be some mechanical issue with the portal or the chair.

Somehow, Kyle managed to hold on to the artifacts and reach the bottom of the mountain just before sundown. He was expecting, based on the amount of time that had elapsed, that there would be a portal waiting. This was not the case.

Kyle waited with the artifacts for nearly 36 hours, going by the sun and the moon, sitting in the biting cold, biding his time. And in the end, it was not even a portal which arrived to pick up Kyle.

“What the fuck?” Kyle said aloud as he saw it. A small black triangular craft was descending from the sky, and eventually landed next to Kyle.

As usual on these types of ships, a ramp lowered from the bottom. Artifacts in hand, Kyle bounded onto the ship.

“Who do I have to fuck so that these technical screw ups don’t happen again?” Kyle bellowed as he hopped onto the ship, only to see that it was empty. Kyle was the only passenger, and the ship was apparently piloted by an AI. The ramp closed, and the ship “jumped.”

The flight took perhaps 15 minutes, and stopped to deposit Kyle (somewhat poetically, it would turn out) on the same landing pad at which he had arrived at Camp Hero, on Walpurgisnacht, 1984. Kyle descended the ship’s ramp and was immediately struck with a certain feeling- uncertainty.

It took Kyle a moment, but it struck him why this was; it was too quiet. No trams. No jeeps. No gunfire. No drill whistles. And towards the lighthouse, playing kickball on one bluff, was a

group of children in Victorian era clothing. Not uniforms or hospital gowns. Kyle rushed towards these children, feeling both happy to see them outside, and worried for them. One girl, a Nordic with the outward age of perhaps seven, saw Kyle's approach. She recognized Kyle, and Kyle recognized her, having escorted her once or twice on missions. Kyle says he believes her name was Annie, though he won't swear to it.

"Kyle! You're back! Someone had asked about you!" The girl shouted.

Kyle knelt to the girl's level, looking her in the eye.

"What is going on? Are you safe? Do you need me to watch you?" Kyle asked.

The girl laughed.

"Kyle. Don't you see? We're free! There was a revolution! We-" the girl began.

Whatever the girl said afterwards is lost to history, as Kyle didn't hear it, as he drew back to his full height, dropped the artifacts, and sprinted- or rather, galloped- along the bluffs. Kyle's primary thoughts were for Max and Harune, of course. And then, after that, his friends and allies. Kyle reached his entrance to the underground by running at what must have been some kind of land speed record. The elevator's descent, which took no more than 20 seconds, were the longest 20 seconds of Kyle's life.

The elevator Kyle took opened into a dark hallway on the second sub-level, as it always did. However, now it was a shambles. Large holes, including bullet holes, riddled the hallway, and one area was visibly effected by a grenade explo-

sion. Several corpses lay at Kyle's feet. Kyle walked the destroyed hallway, somewhat dazed, but focused, determined to find someone- anyone- who could explain what was happening.

Kyle didn't have far to go, it turned out. Not far down the hallway, Kyle found Yoshiro Tsurabaya, his old friend, standing and pissing on the corpse of a man in a Naval uniform.

Kyle: "Yoshiro-san! What the fuck has happened? No, more important; have you seen Max? Harune? Any other of our friends?"

With the devastation of the hallway Kyle stood in, it was easy to draw apocalyptic conclusions. Tsurabaya hastily finished up his "business" on the corpse and turned to face Kyle.

Tsurabaya: "Kyle! It's good to see you. Yes, I've just seen both your boys perhaps two hours ago. They are none the worse for wear. They've been asking after you constantly."

Kyle's fears assuaged slightly, his shoulders relaxed.

Kyle: "And my other questions, Yoshiro-San?"

Tsurabaya: "I believe you've earned the right to simply call me 'Yoshiro' or 'Tsurabaya' now. But your other questions, yes. What the fuck has happened? Well, what the fuck happened is, we won. No one could have planned it- the revolt that was inevitable simply… happened. And our friends? I haven't accounted for them all, but most, I have. They're all right, Kyle."

Kyle stood, simply dazed. Had Kyle breathed, he would have been holding his breath. Then, suddenly feeling a desperate urge to occupy his arms in some way, if only for a few seconds, Kyle stepped forward and hugged Tsurabaya, who reciprocated, and at last, Kyle felt a wave of a new emotion- joy.

Kyle: “Right. Tsurabaya, just a few more things; how long have I been gone?”

Tsurabaya: “A few days. I believe it’s now the 29th of December.”

Kyle: “And why the ship? Why the delay?”

Tsurabaya: “Sorry. The chair was blown up. No portals, aside from the permanent ones, which are non-changeable. Only a few ships have been able to go out and pick people up who were on missions. You were a priority, Jimmy is wanting to see you.”

Kyle: “Jimmy can fucking well wait. I’m going to see my sons, right now. Where did you see them?”

Tsurabaya: “The armory. Helping to take stock.”

Kyle: “Thank you, Tsurabaya. To the future we go, I suppose.”

Kyle set off, resolutely, towards the armory, walking past corpse after corpse. But among the corpses, people were walking, and for the first time at Camp Hero, Kyle saw something almost unimaginable; smiling, happy, hopeful faces.

While the elevator to the second sub-level worked, none of the others were working, forcing Kyle to walk to the armory over a square mile, through the base. But at last Kyle reached it, finding that sub-level three was less damaged than sub-level two, and that the armory seemed intact, save for all that was strewn about, which was admittedly a great mess-up.

“Dad!” Max’s voice shouted.

Kyle looked around to see Max peeking from behind a shelf, with Harune at his side. Kyle rushed to Max and Harune, and after quickly hugging them, he looked them over.

“You’re okay,” Kyle said after a moment, his voice distant. “How did you stay alive?”

Harune: “We hid in a closet with a gun.”

Max: “And shot anyone who came in that wasn’t our age.”

Kyle: “How many people died? Do either of you know?”

Max: “A lot. Nearly all of them perpetrators.”

Slowly, Kyle learned the story, with Max and Harune alternately telling him.

In the moments after Kyle’s leaving, another group had arrived in the portal room in order to leave on a mission. Whichever child had opened Kyle’s portal had been swapped out for Mark Muehlbauer. Mark had, at long last, brought about the end that had always been inevitable.

Mark, rather than opening the portal for the mission, had used the chair’s hyperspace navigation capabilities to propel his own consciousness out of Camp Hero. While Mark’s consciousness was away, he’d brought forth a creature, via the portal he opened. A creature from a world that is not our own. Some plane of existence no man could comprehend.

This creature who Mark had summoned had proceeded to begin and end the promised revolution. Mark had given the creature a list of necessary targets all throughout Camp Hero, and the creature had done its job, ripping its way through the perpetrators, making its appearance that of whomever or whatever each perpetrator feared the most. Even those who had capitulated were killed on the spot.

The perpetrators, of course, had not taken it lying down, and had activated the soldiers on base, and many perpetrators

themselves had taken up arms. Approximately 90 percent of soldiers, however, joined the revolt immediately, as virtually all of these soldiers were or had been victims. A minority did join the perpetrators, hence all the battle damage seen throughout the compound. The revolution had lasted perhaps 36 hours.

"Right," Kyle said, at last standing, once the boys had finished the story. "I suppose I'd best go to contact Emmermann. And then Jimmy."

"Are you not going to change your clothes?" Harune asked with an impish grin.

Kyle looked down and laughed. He was still wearing his Tibetan monastery clothes. In all the panic, Kyle had quite forgotten this.

"Very well. I'm going to go change first." Kyle said sheepishly. "And then I will be seeing everyone. Are you boys okay here for a bit?"

After Max and Harune's assurances that they would be safe, Kyle left the armory, going first to the outfitting area. The fourth sub-level was so damaged that Kyle had to find new routes around it to get to his destination. While there, he saw McKayla Foster and Jack, neither of whom seemed the worse for wear. Angelique, humorously, still stood behind the counter in the outfitting area, and helped Kyle to find a shirt, jeans, and shoes. Now dressed up, Kyle made his way back to his desk, for his glass pad.

Kyle reached the "Securities" sector. Much of it was intact, though many papers were strewn about, and Spellman's office was destroyed and had been defaced with swastikas. Kyle found

his desk unharmed, and while his guns were gone, no doubt having been used in the uprising, his glass pad was right where he had left it. Kyle fired it up and dialed Georg, hoping that Georg was reachable and near to Emmermann, as Kyle at the time had no direct line to Emmermann. As it turned out, Georg did answer.

Georg: “Kyle! Brother! Jack told us everything! How are you?”

Kyle: “I suppose I’m well, save for the uncertain future that I face. What are our benefactor’s plans?”

Georg: “I last heard that he’s finishing business somewhere or other, then he’s to make a trip to Camp Hero. I’ll be accompanying him, I imagine. I can’t wait to see what’s happened.”

Kyle: “It’s beautiful, my friend. I cannot wait for you to see it either. Now, I must locate people. Over and out.”

Georg: “Over and out.”

In spite of Kyle’s generally good mood, he also felt a great deal of unease. What would become of the power vacuum? What would become of the old regime’s loyalists? Surely not all of them had been killed. And what was to be the response when the Air Force and other programs discovered the revolution? Would Project Phoenix continue, in any capacity? So many questions.

Kyle stood from his desk, and made his way towards Jimmy’s office. Perhaps Jimmy would have answers. Jimmy’s office was the only one in the hall of higher-ups offices which had not been destroyed and/or defaced.

Jimmy stood behind the desk, as did a young brown haired

woman Kyle had never seen. The young woman was shuffling papers, and paid no attention to Kyle or Jimmy as they spoke.

Jimmy: “Hello Kyle. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Kyle: “Why me? What’s going to happen next?”

Jimmy: “Well. That’s why I brought you here. I won’t say why now, but things have changed. Obviously. And I think you’re going to be important.”

Kyle: “I suppose I sensed that.”

Jimmy: “I know your benefactor is on his way. He’ll be the first to show up here, but he won’t be the last. Nor will he be the only one to fill the power vacuum. And Kyle, I know you were his spy. I’ve always known. And I know you’ll continue to be. I don’t give a fuck.”

Kyle: “I suppose my benefactor didn’t hide it very well. What happens immediately?”

Jimmy: “For now, I’m in charge. And for reasons I won’t explain yet, I doubt that will change. I am sorry you missed the revolution, the celebrations, and the reprisals, Kyle. You deserved to see those.”

Kyle: “I can imagine them even better than they likely were.”

Jimmy: “I doubt that. But at any rate; not all the perpetrators were killed. Nicholas himself escaped through one of the permanent portals. So did Dr. Simmons and Colonel Constantine. We will have to find them. But at any rate; our more frequent visitors, when they realize we’re not transmitting and that their attempts to dial the chair aren’t working, will begin arriving via ships. In droves.”

Kyle: “What of the project?”

Jimmy: “Kyle, the project was never to end. We will continue our work, but under a new management. But for now, all we can do is wait.”

Kyle: “And the children?”

Jimmy: “We can’t send them home. But we also can’t keep them all. Most will have to be transferred. But for the first time, we’re in control and can find the best options for them.”

Kyle nodded and slowly turned to leave.

Jimmy: “Kyle? One last thing. Go to battery 113. It’s open now. You’ll know why when you get there.”

Kyle knew, roughly, the purpose of battery 113. It housed the children not privileged enough to receive barracks housing or live in families. Kyle knew the conditions were not ideal. All throughout his time at Camp Hero, Kyle had heard whispers of it. Nothing could have prepared him for the reality.

The ground level floor of battery 113 was empty, save for one metal desk, and an electronic machine gun turret with a camera trained on a trapdoor to the basement. Kyle grabbed a paper from the desk and waved it before the turret. The turret didn’t fire, apparently having been switched off, and so Kyle entered the trapdoor, only to return to the desk and search it until he found a flashlight. The basement was extremely dark. His flashlight on, Kyle walked down the wide concrete steps into the worst site of his life.

The basement was quite large. However, it stood divided down the middle. On either side were two large chicken wire enclosures, themselves filled with large metal dog cages, stacked in rows and columns. The gate to each cage had a

number on it. At the end of each chicken wire enclosure was a single bucket. Not that these buckets had done much good, as small piles of human waste were in many cages, as were dog bowls, which Kyle realized must have been used to dish out food. Each side also had a small generator, with wires and clamps coming from them, connecting to the cages. Electrifying the cages.

Kyle thought of all the many children he had escorted on missions, or simply seen around the base. Their innocent, sweet faces looking out of the cages they lived in, but could not touch, for fear of electrocution.

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!” Kyle screamed at the top of his lungs. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

The rage out of the way, for the moment, Kyle backed up to one of the concrete walls, and with his back leaned against it, wept like a baby. An action that would have gotten one of the cage room’s occupants a punishment, Kyle realized. His weeping was broken only when he felt hands on his shoulders, and looked down to see Norma Jean. She must have heard Kyle screaming.

Norma Jean spoke one simple word; “Yes.”

There were no other words necessary for a moment. But at last, Kyle recovered himself.

Kyle: “Were you housed here?”

Norma Jean: “No. I was lucky, I came here as an adult, as you did. Very long story Kyle. But my children were housed here, before they were taken.”

A sad, reflective look came over Norma Jean’s eyes as she

spoke and took in the unspeakable scene, and she and Kyle stood in silence for a moment. Kyle asked no questions- he didn't need to. Everything around him explained itself quite well enough.

Kyle and Norma Jean's silence was broken at last by shouts from above, and the unmistakable whirring of a large ship.

"Hey! Ship is coming in!" a voice above shouted.

"Big ass ship, too!" shouted another.

Purposefully, Kyle took Norma Jean's hand and began up the steps out of the basement, to leave battery 113. The ship was Emmermann's, Kyle guessed, and he needed to be there to greet his benefactor, not to mention Georg. And even if it wasn't, Kyle felt it important that he be there.

"Where are we going, Kyle?" Norma Jean asked as they began up the steps. She spoke in a tone that made it obvious she was not asking about a physical destination.

Kyle looked back at Norma Jean, a resolute smile slowly spreading over his face.

"To the future." Kyle said.

Author's note. Well, it is over. The second volume of my endeavor has reached completion. I would like to thank all the readers who read and gave feedback to Volume I. I would also like to thank Alexander Cherkasov, without whose encouragement (and badgering) I'd have never completed this volume before the New Year. To everyone else; stay tuned. In cases it was not obvious, Kyle's story is very far from over.

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